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✧🌦WELCOME🌦✧

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MAIN CHARACTERS
Marianne Parker & **Sawyer Cortez**

❤The Playlist❤
"Clint Eastwood" – Gorillaz
"Fluorescent Adolescent" - Arctic Monkeys
"I walk this earth all by myself" – EKKSTACY
"Let's Talk About Nothing" – whytide
"Devil Like Me" – Rainbow Kitten Surprise
"Tear in My Heart" - Twenty One Pilots
"Boys Don't Cry" - The Cure
"Hand in My Pocket" – Alanis Morisette
"Everywhere" - Fleetwood Mac
"Nice To Meet You" – Myles Smith
"Someone New" - Hozier
"Drops of Jupiter (Tell Me)" - Train
"Wonderwall" – Oasis
"Like Real People Do" – Hozier
"My Fun" – Suki Waterhouse
"I want to be with you" - Chloe Moriondo
"Cigarette Daydreams" – Cage the Elephant
"Always Forever" – Cults
"AOK" – Tai Verdes
"In A Good Way" - Faye Webster
"Apocalypse" - Cigarettes After Sex
"Only Exception" - Paramore
"Catch Me" - JVKE
"Come Over (Again)" – Crawlers
"Not" - Big Thief
"Double Edged Sword" - Hailey Picardi
"I'm With You" – Avril Lavigne
"The Few Things" - JP Saxe
"Feel Again" - Kina & Au/Ra
"Her" – JVKE

"You, Dear" – Eloise

Aesthetic

"But you, dear, I didn't think I'd find you here."
*- **Eloise***

☀ **Summary** ☀

Marianne and Sawyer are opposites of each other.

When they meet, it becomes all too clear that there's something about her he can't ignore. From the way she walks, talks, laughs, and smiles, it's all distracting and unfamiliar to him. And, of course, he doesn't like that.

*In his efforts, he tries to ignore it and avoid **HER** at all costs. But, that can be hard when the girl in question is **EQUALLY** interested in him too...*

Authors Note

👏👏 ***claps excitedly*** 👏👏

I can't wait to share this story with you!!! I love it so much, and I feel like you will too!!!

*This story has the trope **GrumpyXSunshime**!! It's also a slowburn and the main love interest is an asshole.*
Figured I'd let you know ahead of time, but I assure you, he gets better!!
Also mentions of heavier topics do happen in this story (drugs/alcohol, abuse, mental health) so just a TW for ya

*I can't promise you that I have the best updating schedule, but I'll try!! I'm in school and work, so I can't guarantee that I'll update within a good timeframe. But I **CAN** promise that I'll update!!! It'll just take a minute!!!*

*Also!! Huge confession, this book has been under some **SERIOUS** editing, changing, flipping, **YOU NAME IT** .*

OG readers know what it's been through😂 😂

*It's going under revision **AGAIN** , and this is the last one!!*

After this, it is what it is

I realized it needed more character development and more storyline/plot so I am working on fixing that!! This story is still the same!! Nothing's changed minus a few new scenes!! Other than that, it's pretty much one to one!!

*It has taken some **TIME** to get finished. So, thanks for checking in!!*

You're awesome!!☺□□□

Please be sure to vote and comment on what some of your favorite parts are if you're enjoying it!! I love hearing feedback from you guys!! It warms my heart!!□↕□□□

And so!!! With further ado-
□□□□□

I HOPE YOU ENJOY

☘EPIGRAPH☘

[image]

[image]

"If every bad thing that's ever happened to me meant I'd meet you when I did, I'd do it all over again. 'Cause I'd know for sure it was worth it. You're worth it."
*- **Author***

[image]

8 years ago...

[image] [image] [image] [image]

It was a cold December evening:
New Year's Eve.

Light snow coated everything in sight, the streets, cars, houses, sidewalks, trees, and grass. Truly a winter wonderland I had thought as I marveled at it all.

Though there wasn't a moon out that night, I thought the stars made up for it.

I remembered thinking, *"How pretty,"* as 10-year-old me tried to name all the constellations she could see.

The day didn't feel like anything special or different. Mom, Dad, and I were visiting family in Michigan since the move, just for a week.

We attended a family gathering every year around the same time to catch up with cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Same old, same old.

And though it was the same, I was cautiously optimistic that year, mainly because I hoped that, for once, it wouldn't be like it was every time.

Leaving me, and only me...**crying**.

Unfortunately, it turned out to be just like that. Except, I did something about it this time-

Face soaked in tears, I ran out the front door, jumped off the porch, and scrambled out the yard. I ran down the sidewalk as fast as my short, shaky legs could carry me. Relatives shouted behind me from the house, but I didn't bother turning back.

I kept going, no destination in mind, and desperately wanting not to

think. Let alone feel.

I wanna get away...

I thought as the frosty night air nipped at my skin, creating goosebumps. Instantly, I was freezing, and I huffed out a staggered breath. However, I didn't slow down.

I stumbled but clumsily regained my balance while my vision blurred, and tears spilled down my cheeks profusely. They soaked the collar of my red dress, making me feel colder.

I didn't know how long I ran for, everything fizzled out around me as I went further and further away. Finally, I stopped to catch my breath, hand on my chest as I gulped air like a fish.

Coughing, I looked around, taking slow deep breaths. I noticed a stop sign as I surveyed the street and sidewalk.

A park was just a few meters across the road, and behind me, was where I came from somewhere back there. I couldn't see it anymore. Figured I'd gotten a good distance away.

Hopefully, I remember how to get back...

I thought as I wiped my face a few times, trying to get the tears and ache to go away. But they persisted. I shivered, holding myself, and sniffling as I made my way across the street and into the park.

I didn't grab my coat before I ran, and was quickly starting to regret it

Once I drew near the swings, I stepped closer, and my foot slipped on a patch of ice. I yelped, tripped, and fell into the snow-covered mulch. I scraped my knee and winced at the throbbing pain that settled in my leg.

I hissed, *"Owie..."* I shakily pushed myself upright, realizing the state I was in.

A mess, no doubt...

I was covered in dirty snow and grass, and my tights were torn. I looked at my knee and frowned when I saw the scrape. Fed up, I wanted to cry more, and my eyes stung. I covered my face with my hands, a shudder escaping me as I sobbed in silence.

I don't remember how long I sat there for, had to have been a few minutes, until I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I froze, looked behind me, and found a boy standing there.

He had dark curly hair, a blue coat, and black torn jeans. There was a grocery bag in one hand while the other hovered over my shoulder. His cheeks were flushed from the cold, and a brown scarf wrapped around his neck.

Our eyes met, and he stilled, eyes widening slightly. They swarmed with concern and shock, but he didn't say anything at first. Neither did I as we stared at one another in this new silence.

A few seconds passed, and it wasn't long before he cautiously asked, *"Are you...okay?"*

I hadn't realized he said anything until I finally came back to the present. I stiffened and quickly turned away, embarrassed, *"Um...**Yes.**"* I wiped my face, *"I just...fell."*

*" **You sure** ?"*

I refused to look at him, praying by some miracle that I sounded believable, *"...I'm sure..."*

I glanced at him, and I could tell by the look on his face that he didn't quite believe me.

Despite the look, he nodded much to my relief, "**Alright**." He rubbed his head, ruffling his hair, "I was walking by, and saw you, so..." I looked up at him, teary-eyed as he said, sheepishly, "I wanted to make sure."

I shook my head, *"Thank you, but...**I'm okay**."*

Wiping my face with the back of my arm, I attempted to stand but winced at the pain in my knee. I fell onto my butt and looked at the

scrape that had bled through the tear of my tights and hissed.

The boy's brows furrowed instantly, "Oh—" He stepped closer, "You're bleeding."

"It's just...a tiny scratch—"

"**Tiny scratch my ass**."

He dropped his grocery bag, kneeled, dug into his pocket, and pulled out a box of band-aids. I froze, blinking at him as he tore it open, pulled out a band-aid, and gently placed it over my wound.

"That should be good for now." He murmured, pulling away and shoving the paper and box into his coat, "At least protected from the cool."

I only blinked, stunned, as he made sure the band-aid was on thoroughly.

How unexpected...and very...

After a moment, I found myself snorting loudly, and my cheeks warmed.

Kind.
How kind of him...

The tears that were falling from my face slowed down as I giggled, and soon the boy noticed. He looked up at me, confused, "Sorry, but...uh...why are we laughing?"

I shook my head, laughing harder, and he stared at me like I sprouted a second head.

After a moment, he then frowned, "Oh-You didn't hit your head too, did you? I hope not, I don't have a band-aid for that—"

"No, no, I didn't. It's just—" I sniffled, smiling, "Do you always have band-aids with you?" I tilted my head at him, "Like...at all times?"

He blinked, then a tiny half-smile eased onto his lips. Softening, he

replied honestly, "Well...**no**."

He stood up, grabbed his grocery bag, and held his hand out to me, "Just so happened to be coming back from the store and band-aids were on the list of things to get, so..."

I smiled and gently took his hand. It was cold, just like mine, but felt warm once I held on. He carefully helped me stand, and I wobbled a bit.

I found my balance, murmuring, "Talk about timing." He laughed slightly, gripping my hand, "I'll say."

I let go and dusted myself off, "Thank you—" I stopped when I thought about what he said, "Wait—" I looked up at him, brows furrowed, "You went...to a store...this late?" He nodded, and I asked, *"By yourself?"*

He nodded again, and the look on his face made it seem like it was the most normal thing in the world. Like he'd done this countless times.

I could tell he was just a kid like me, and not only that, but it was also almost 11 p.m. on New Year's Eve. He should've been with family or someone to bring in the new year.

It set off alarms in my head.

I raised a brow when the question arose in my thoughts. I didn't voice it, but I didn't have to because after a moment of staring blankly, the boy's expression shifted. Like he knew what I was thinking.

His face slowly became something more like an "I've been caught" look. Subtle, but evident.

He cleared his throat, tugging at his collar uncomfortably, "Right, uh..." He grew tense, "My mom, she's...***sick***, so...she sends me to run errands when she can't." I softened as he avoided my gaze, explaining, "It's not far, only a five-minute walk, so...I don't mind."

Oh...

"I see..." I mumbled, feeling bad for asking. After a brief while, it seemed to get lost in thought, I gave him an encouraging smile and softly admitted, "That's very brave of you."

His deep brown eyes flitted to mine, meeting them once more. Though somber and distant almost, they softened, "**Thanks**."

He glanced around us, momentarily, then back at me with inquisitive eyes, "What about you?" He motioned to me, "Why're you out on your own?"

My stomach sank at the question, and I began fiddling with my hands.

Because...it feels like...my family hates me-

"**Lost**."

It wasn't a complete lie.

I had forgotten how to get back, thus meaning I ***was*** lost. But at the same time, I wasn't open to talking about what made me get lost in the first place.

Mainly because this boy was a stranger first and foremost, and second, I was sure he wouldn't want to be trauma-dumped. Especially not when it was clear he had his own things to deal with.

"I was at a party, and...we were playing hide-and-seek. I hid at the park." I gestured around sheepishly, "Now I'm...lost." I shrugged stiffly, "I thought I knew my way back, but...I don't."

"Oh." He frowned, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I shivered, holding myself, "I wish...I wasn't so forgetful...I always am..."

I ruin everything...

I felt the tears threatening to spill from my eyes as my gaze fell to my snow and grass-covered shoes. My bottom lip quivered as I tried to hold it together and sighed silently when-

"**Here**."

A coat wrapped around me, and I stilled. I looked up at the boy, noticing he had removed his jacket and given it to me.

He softly patted my shoulders, *"You'll get sick otherwise."*

I blinked, speechless as he picked up his grocery bag and shoved his band-aids and some change inside it.

I watched in quiet awe before stammering, "But-I—" I stepped closer, my cheeks warming up, "What about you? Aren't you cold—"

"I'm wearing more layers than you are, ***dummy****."* He laughed, and I stopped. Turning to me, he smirked, bemused, *"Don't worry, 'kay?"*

My face felt like it turned ten shades of red, and I was grateful that it was dark out. Grabbing the coat, I held it closer, feeling warmer than I had moments ago. I shuffled my feet, *"...okay..."*

He nodded, adjusting his scarf. He sat in silence briefly before turning to me, "You know your address?"

"Oh, um..." I muttered, "**I do**."

"Okay." Timid, he held his hand out and softly said, ***"I'll walk you****...If that's alright."*

I marveled at him, not sure how to respond. I hadn't expected that, but despite my shock, I managed a nod and took his hand.

"You know the neighborhood?" I asked, stepping closer. "I do." The boy nodded kindly, "I walk through here a lot."

"You live close?"

"Just outside of it."

Carefully, I limped behind him as we inched our way out of the icy playground. He helped me step as we both relied on one another to keep balance. We shared a quiet laugh as we slipped but somehow managed not to fall.

My palm gripped his, uncertain, and he held on a bit tighter. Subtle, like offering reassurance somehow.

Once we made it to the street, safe from ice, I found myself wondering, "Oh, wait-what about your mom?" The boy turned to me, "My mom?"

"Yeah! Won't she be worried?"

"**No**."

I didn't miss the way his tone changed, resigned and flat. He didn't look at me after that, his shoulders tense as he added, "**She won't.**" I blinked at him while he stared straight ahead, "I doubt she even knows I'm gone."

I gazed at him in silence as snow fell from the clouds overhead, soft, and quiet like our footsteps on the white sidewalk. Something about the way he said that, made a part of me feel...**sad**.

Deep ache.

He admitted it as if it were a fact. Put plainly and full of acceptance. Though his face didn't show it, and his demeanor was calm and unsettled, it was clear it bothered him. A lot more than he was saying, let alone showing.

Though I wanted to ask why he thought that, I chose not to. Figured it was best not to pry, and evidently something he didn't want to talk about.

So instead, I squeezed his hand, and he looked back at me. We stopped once we crossed the street and stood on the sidewalk under a streetlight.

I tilted my head at him, "Is there...someone else who'll worry about you?" He paused, thinking, "Mmm...I have a baby sister...and an older brother."

I smiled, "Cool!! I always wanted siblings!! Especially a baby sister!! I bet she's cute!!" He returned my smile, the tension within him dissolving, "She is."

We walked for a bit, and he asked what my address was. I told him, and we were on our merry way. Quiet silence fell over us, not tense or awkward, just quiet as we walked side by side through the dark.

We approached the house after a few minutes. It was lit, the door wide open, and lots of people chattering inside. No one was waiting for me, so they hadn't noticed I'd returned yet.

Which made me both grateful and a little disappointed.

"This it?" The boy asked, my hand still in his. "Yes." I turned to him, "Thank you again."

"Sure." He replied warmly, "Try not to get lost again, yeah?" I giggled, my cheeks heating up, "I'll try."

He let my hand go, and the feeling lingered. I had noticed it briefly, the loss of touch. It left my hand feeling colder than usual, not just from the snow. But, I didn't ponder it for too long.

"Oh! Don't forget your coat!" I blurted, taking it off and giving it back to him, "It's cold!!"

He took it, and slipped it on, "Thanks." He zipped it up, just under his chin, and adjusted his scarf. His attention then settled on me, "Well...I'll be seeing you."

"Yeah. See you."

He nodded, and I turned to walk away. I only took one step before stopping though. The thought I had was completely impulsive. But even so, I wanted to somehow make it known that what had happened was important. And meaningful. Especially to him, his kindness, and subtle admission about his home life.

I looked at him, determined, and he froze. He became concerned, "Uh...everything alright—"

I stepped closer, threw my arms around his neck, and tugged him into me. He tensed, his grocery bag dropping from his hand as I held him.

My eyes shut as a cold breeze passed and I whispered, *"**Happy New Year**. And...please take care...'kay?"*

He didn't move at first, frozen like the ice that settled on cars and lightpoles. Slowly, he wrapped his arms around me too, and held me closer. His whole body eased, and he murmured, *"**You too**."*

Though the moment should've been a little more awkward, it wasn't. It felt natural. Warm. After a moment of silence, we parted, and I quickly rushed to the house. I jogged onto the porch, face hot as I made it to the door and reached for the handle.

However, I glanced over my shoulder just for a second, and found him walking down the sidewalk, grocery bag in hand. He disappeared into the night, the streetlights illuminating his shadow before he turned the corner and was gone.

It wasn't long before someone from inside noticed me standing on the porch, covered in dirt and tattered clothes. I was brought in, covered in blankets, and given hot drinks to warm me up. Everyone asked why I ran off, and where I'd gone.

I lied and only told them part of the story.

I didn't mention I heard what they said about me, nor that I was feeling out of place.

I knew they wouldn't listen, tell me to get over it, so I settled on keeping quiet. I told them I ran to the park and left out the part where I met a boy. And as I told them the story, I realized...

I didn't know his name.

The realization made me want to facepalm and laugh all at once. I was usually better at things like that, but I guess it hadn't crossed my mind.

As the night ended, and everyone celebrated New Year's, I sat in bed, wrapped in blankets, with my cousins who slept beside me. Music was blasting in the living room as the adults drank and talked, and I gazed out the window to watch the snow delicately paint the ground and frost the windows.

Deep in thought, I recalled my time with the boy. Short, but impactful. A gentle reminder that not everything is bad, that problems aren't forever, and eventually, somewhere, somehow, there is good.

Goodness in the little things that can make the heavier stuff seem lighter. They can still happen despite the tough times. It's possible.

You just...have to have hope.

01: The Pessimist

[image] [image] [image] [image]

SAWYER

"**Who pissed in** your cereal this morning?" Donovan, one of the few people I associate with, chews loudly, "You've ignored me since I got here."

I don't answer him, sipping my coffee and doing my crossword.

Eyeballing me across the kitchen table, he waves, "**Hello**? I know you can hear me!! You'd be saying I'm eating too loud or calling me an idiot by now!!"

I continue to write, ignoring him.

"**It's bothering me.**"

Donovan Harris. He practically lives at my house. The little shit never goes home. I've known him since 1st grade, and I keep him around for whatever reason. Have for over ten years.

Despite my irritation with him sometimes, he's been my biggest support for so long, so I'll bear it.

His blue eyes narrow, "Silent treatment, eh? Very mature. And you say I'm the immature one."

I don't say anything but frown at his comment.

"Haha!! You made a face!! We're making progress!!" He sings, shoveling a spoonful of cereal into his mouth, "I like this game!!"

Looking up from my crossword, I glare, and he pauses. "Oh-Okay...now you're, like...***constipated***, to be honest," He studies my face, gesturing to me with his spoon, "What's up with that?"

"**That's just his face**." Peanut, my sister, giggles as she jumps up

from her seat, empty plate in hand.

Mercedes Elaine Cortez, but everyone calls her Peanut.

I'm not sure how the nickname started, it's just something that stuck one day.

I'm nine years older than her; she's a 4th grader and does gymnastics and ballet. Plus, she always dresses in tutus, leggings, and tiaras. She's wearing them right now. She's a smartass, but that could be my fault. She tends to copy me and has picked up a few of my habits too.

I shoot her a glare, "So funny. Literal comedic genius."

She laughs at my sarcasm, walking to the kitchen sink and standing on the stepstool.

I turn to Donovan, grumbling just loud enough for him to hear, *"And I do not look constipated, **you ass**. I'm pissed, and you know why."*

I woke up this morning at precisely 8:45 for no damn reason. We're coming up on the last week of summer, a Saturday, not gym day, and I don't have work.

I have nowhere to be, so you better believe I'm trying to spend it being lazy. Plus, I hardly ever get good sleep. Five hours at most. So, I tried to force myself to sleep, but my family was making it impossible. They were running around the house in a frenzy (like usual).

Long story short, Donovan came into my room, speaker in hand, and played "Thomas the Train Theme Song: Bass Boosted".

I fell out of bed, hit my head, and was livid.

What made it worse was before I could get my hands on him, he threw a stuffed unicorn at me and booked it downstairs, yelling, *"**HELP!! HELP!!**"*

Coward...

"I was fuckin' around!! It was funny!!" Donovan chuckles, setting his spoon down in his bowl. He grabs his cup of orange juice, sipping it, "Even *you* can admit that was hilarious."

"Absolutely not."

Suddenly, I feel a hand ruffle my hair and I tense up. Out of nowhere, Dad says from behind me, "It was pretty funny, Sawyer. And language, Donovan."

"Sorry, Mr. Cortez!!" Donovan laughs.

I look back at Dad as he walks to the fridge, "Of course you'd think that. You're not doing anything but feeding into his delusions."

Gabriel Cortez, aka, my dad, is 48 and a construction worker. Everyone around town seems to know him, quite the popular man.

Our relationship hasn't always been the best, but over the past year since moving in with him, it's gotten better. We've bridged the gap between us. He and Donovan act a lot alike, so he tends to side with Donovan over me.

And I'm his son, imagine that.

"You're so uptight." Donovan laughs, and Dad agrees, "You never laugh at anything."

"I'm not uptight, and everything isn't funny." I state bluntly, "Laughing at everything would make you crazy."

"There he goes again; being a pessimist." Dad chuckles, pouring a cup of orange juice.

"Seriously." Donovan runs a hand through his fro.

"Are we still going school shopping today, Daddy?" Peanut asks, skipping toward him and grabbing his hand.

He looks down at her, screwing the lid onto the orange juice bottle. Smiling, he rubs her head, "Yes, Peanut, we are."

"**YAY**!!" She chirps, her long chestnut hair bouncing as she leaps excitedly. Turning to Donovan and me, she asks, "You guys are gonna come too, right?"

"Of course!! I don't see why not!!" Donovan smiles, and her eyes light up as she grins, revealing one of her missing front teeth.

Running up, she grabs his hands, "You'll come?"

Laughing, Donovan rubs Peanut's head, "Yeah!! Right, Sawyer?"

Shooting me a look, Donovan raises a brow, and Peanut does too. I pause, looking between them. They stare with pursed lips and hopeful eyes, dramatically, of course.

I close my crossword book, "**No**."

My plans are as follows:

Doing absolutely nothing.

"But why?" Donovan whines, and Peanut frowns, "You've been in the house for the past three days!! Zachary and I want to hang outside for once!!"

"I plan to continue that three-day streak, thanks." I stand up, "And if you don't want to hangout here, there's such a thing as **not** coming over at all."

"Aw, c'mon, Sawyer!! You can shop too!! You'll be starting your senior year in a week!! I'm sure you're excited about that!!" Dad explains, shrugging, "Don't you want new stuff for the new year? You might meet a girl you want to impress."

"No, and I'm not interested in some girl."

Most of them are annoying and dense as fuck. I don't "date," so that's out the window. All I want is a normal year of high school.

And maybe something good too. For once.

Absentmindedly, I grab the dogtag hanging from my neck at that

thought, feeling sappily hopeful. Tugging me from thought, Peanut darts in front of me, her round eyes pleading.

I stare at her indifferently, "No means no, Peanut."

"But please? I want you to come!! You can help pick out my tutus for ballet like we did last time!!" She begs, grabbing my arm and shaking me desperately, "Evan won't come, so please, Sawyer?"

"Evan won't what??"

We look toward the staircase, finding Evan standing there, half-eaten Twinkie in one hand, and a can of Sprite in the other. His brown hair is pulled into a man bun as he looks at us curiously.

Evan Ian Cortez is my older brother. He's 21, freshman in college, and is a bartender. He's a gym-rat and works out around six hours a day, three hours in the morning and three more at night.

"You're the one taking my Sprites?" Donovan gasps, bringing a hand to his chest. Evan pauses, looking from him to the can, "Oh, these were yours?"

*" **Are** ."*

"***Were***. Now it's part of my breakfast!!" He grins cheekily, "I'm bulking, so..."

"Hey!! We're going school shopping!!" Peanut smiles, "I said you wouldn't come, but would you?"

Staring momentarily, Evan then snorts, "Hah!!" Cackling, he turns away, "Yeah, no!! Sorry, Peanut!! I already graduated high school!!" Jogging upstairs, he shouts over his shoulder, "Later, losers!!"

"See!!" Peanut frowns, pointing at the stairs, "Pretty please!! I'll never ask you for anything else!!"

That's a lie...

"Plus, he's been taking my Sprites!! You're going to let him get away with that?" Donovan adds, but I don't acknowledge him.

I stare down at Peanut, her face flushing, and eyes watering more by the second. I waver as she becomes more emotional and weigh my options.

List of Cons:
Dealing with the public. Socializing. Dealing with the public. My obnoxious ass friends who'll more than likely show up. Dealing with the public.

List Of Pros:
Not Applicable (NA)

Yeah, it's clear what I ***should*** choose.

Sighing with defeat, I rub my face, "**Fine. I'll go.**"

But I tend to have a tough time when it comes to Peanut. After all, she is my little sister, and we've been through hell and back over the years. The least I can do is try to keep her happy.

Instantly, her eyes light up, her tears disappearing as fast as they came. Without warning, she wraps her arms around my legs, and I grunt, "**YAY!! THANKS, SAWYER!!**"

"Yeah, yeah..." I stiffly pat her head, *"I'll go if it means you'll quit bugging me..."*

I survey the store covered in glitter, pink, unicorns, princesses, castles, and, of course, people. Mothers, in particular, stare at me while Peanut takes nail polishes and examines the colors.

Being in here hurts my pride. And my eyes. I stand silently, tense, but mostly irritated.

"Look how pretty!!" Peanut chirps, turning to face me. I look down at her as she holds up a bottle of blue/glittery polish, "It's pretty, isn't it?"

"Yep."

"You think I should get it?"

"Sure." Growing agitated when more people start staring, I add, "C'mon so we can go."

"But we gotta get my tutus!!" She quips, "You promised!!" Grabbing my arm, she drags me through the store, and I grunt, stumbling behind as she chirps, "C'mon!! The tutus are over here!!"

I stifle a groan, "Okay, okay, but slow down."

Lakeview Square Mall.

The only mall Dad and Peanut will visit here in Battle Creek, Michigan. They might as well live here. Plus, it doesn't help that we live two miles away.

Once we got into the mall, Donovan and Dad decided to go to the food-court while Peanut and I went to her favorite store: ***"Glitter 'N Sass"***.

Even the name of this place is a headache.

I tried to protest to the best of my ability, but as said before, when it comes to Peanut, I like to keep her happy. After walking around this hideous place and helping Peanut pick out her tutus and various other non-necessities, we finally check out and go.

"Here." I hand her the bag of basically glitter, "You can hold your own shit."

"Yay!! Thank you!!" She sings, taking it. Pausing, she looks up at me confusedly, "Wait-you just cussed."

"I did."

"Does that mean I can too?"

"No."

"But why?"

"Cause I said so."

"That's not fair."

"So's life." I state dryly, "And don't tell Dad I said it, 'kay?"

He'd be mad if he found out. My uncle, Alejandro, is the same way. She repeats anything she hears whether from Donovan or me. She's with us most of the time.

"Hm...okay!!" She shrugs, looking at her bag. She digs through it, pulling off the pink tiara on her head and replacing it with a silver and gold one.

She grins, "Whatcha think?"

"Looks good."

Holding out my hand, I state, "Let's go find where Dad and Don ran off to."

Grabbing my hand, she nods, "Okay!!"

We walk out and make our way to the food-court. I grip Peanut's hand and keep her close since there are so many people here, and she's tiny to be nine.

"Yay!! Look who made it back in one piece!!" Dad sings happily, eating a soft pretzel when we approach. Grabbing his napkin, he wipes his hands, "That wasn't so bad now was it, Sawyer?"

"You're right-it was worse." I reply, letting go of Peanut's hand. Grunting, I sit down, and Dad chuckles.

Peanut raises a brow, sitting beside Dad and leaving her bag on the floor, "But because I was there, I made it better, right?"

I turn to her, noting the hope in her eyes.

"Sure." I shrug, and she smiles. Leaning down, I pick up her bag and hang it off the back of her chair, "Don't leave your bag on the floor. You'll lose it."

She nods, grinning, and I look at the table, noticing the food

scattered on top of it. Chicken tenders, fries, a plate of nachos, Dad's soft pretzel, and four drinks. There's a smaller cup out of the four that I'm assuming is Peanut's.

Grabbing the cup in front of me, I bring the straw to my lips and sip it, tasting orange soda. Thinking, I start wondering where Donovan ran off to.

"Where's Donovan?" I ask, looking at Dad. Motioning behind me, Dad replies, chewing softly, "Right there."

I look over my shoulder, cup still in hand, and spot Donovan walking over with Elias by his side. They laugh, playfully shoving one another as they approach.

Great. Dumb and Dumber have reunited.

Sighing, I stand up, mentally preparing myself.

"Sawyer!! Look who I found in the mall?!" Donovan beams, grabbing and shaking Elias's shoulders, "He didn't even tell us he was back in town!!"

"It was supposed to be a surprise!!" Elias chuckles as he and Donovan stand in front of me.

Elias Nelson is another person who I associate with. He's the tallest out of all of us (6'3) and he and Donovan are two peas in a pod. More like two pains in my ass I've tolerated over the years.

I've kept him around since 7th grade for whatever reason, and he was gone for a week to visit family in California.

The guys were all torn up about it, and as much as I hate to admit it, it was weird without him in our mess of a group.

"You still could've told us!!" Donovan snorts, "What are you doing here?"

"Hangin' around." Elias explains, as they begin doing their handshake. I frown when they start doing sound effects, grinning, and chanting, ***"BADASSES."***

"Elias!!" Peanut chirps, jumping up from her seat and darting toward him. He laughs as she runs into him, hugging his legs, and he rubs her head, smirking, "Hey, hey, Peewee!!"

"It's Peanut!!" She giggles.

"Oh!! Really? I must've forgotten."

Elias picks her up. She laughs loudly as he carefully sits her on his shoulders.

"Wow!!" She gasps, grabbing his head as he holds on to her calves. Wide-eyed, she marvels around her.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Elias mumbles, and she nods, "You comfortable?"

"Yeah!!" She chirps, still looking at everything.

"Good!"

He nudges my shoulder, and I give him a disapproving look as he sings, "Hey, Sawyer!! How's it going, broski?"

"Don't call me that." I step away from him. He laughs, his dark red hair falling in his eyes, "God, I've missed you, y'know that? Out of the guys, I missed you the most."

"Who wouldn't miss good ole Sawyer?"

We look to our left and spot another member of our group. "Zachary!!" Donovan and Elias sing happily.

I stuff my hands into my pockets and nod in his direction. He returns it, smirking as he looks amongst us, "Hello, my fellow idiots!!"

Zachary Douglas is the only one, aside from myself, who has any damn common sense and isn't a complete headache. I've also known him since 7th grade. He's calmer, and more tolerable than the other two, but he has his moments when he acts like them.

"Hi, Zach!!" Peanut waves from above. He looks up, his curly blonde

hair falling into his eyes, "Hey, Peanut! Having fun?"

"Yeah!! I can see everything up here!!" She laughs.

"All the guys are here!!" Elias grins, and Donovan agrees. They both exchange a look, plotting only God knows what behind those eyes. "We're not doing anything stupid, don't even think about it." I state, and the two instantly shoot me innocent grins.

"**Wouldn't dream of it.**"

"**Promise**."

Smirking, Zachary says, "I didn't think Sawyer would be leaving the house anytime soon unless to go to his uncle's or work. At least not until school started back."

"It took some convincing, but he gave in after Peanut begged!!" Donovan chuckles, "Bro changed his mind so fast!! Haha!! Softie—"

I hit him upside the head, and he flinches, "**Hush**."

Rubbing his head, he whines, ***"Hey—"***

"**You're fine**."

"Elias, can I repaint your nails?" Peanut blurts, and Elias grins, looking up at her. She motions to his sparkly red nails.

"Yeah!!" He smiles, "When I visit again, I'll let you paint them!! Promise!!"

"Now that the gang's here, what's the plan?" Donovan asks, raising a brow. "We hangout!!" Elias dances a little, and Peanut giggles, "We could go to the jump place that just opened! I hear it's fun!!!"

"What about the Arcade? We barely went this summer." Zachary asks, and Elias and Donovan both grin.

"Dude, I'm kicking your ass at this game!!" Donovan laughs maniacally, and Zachary frowns, stirring his wheel. "Zach, do not let him pass you!!" Elias shouts, grabbing his shoulder.

I watch as Donovan takes the lead again, and Zachary somehow swerves into a ditch. Reaching the finish-line, Donovan pumps his fists in the air, and Zachary huffs.

"First place!!" Donovan cheers, looking at Zachary cockily, "Suck it!!"

After leaving Peanut and Dad, the guys and I arrived here. "The Arcade." That's the name of this place. Generic. The guys are playing race car games, and I'm just observing.

"You got left!!" Elias pats Zachary on the back, "My turn!! Let me teach this asshole a lesson for ya!!"

"As if." Donovan scoffs. I shake my head as Zachary and Elias swap places. The next game begins, and I start feeling thirsty.

"I'm getting a drink." I announce, and of course, no one acknowledges.

Too immersed in the game.

I walk off, sliding past people as they chatter among the loud music and play various games. I arrive in the dining area and grab a menu off a nearby table.

After reading the menu, I approach the cashier, setting it aside as I tug my wallet from my hoodie.

Just as I'm about to order, a faint sound gathers my attention. I pause, hearing what sounds like a piano, gently echoing from afar. My brows furrow, listening to this soft melody, despite how loud the arcade is.

"You ready to order?" The cashier asks, and I don't respond at first.

I continue staring into the distance, listening.

That sound...

"Um, sir?" The cashier waves. I look back at her as she asks, "Ready to order?"

"You hear that?" I raise a brow.

"What? The piano? Yeah, there's a thrift shop across the hall that has one." The cashier explains, pushing up her glasses, "This girl works there and plays it everyday."

A girl?

"Across the hall?"

"Yeah. At 'Philocalist."

***Philocalist** ? What kind of name is that?*

I nod and find myself listening to that piano again. I turn away from the counter, walking away and heading toward the sound.

"**You're not going to order?**" The cashier calls out, but I don't reply.

I exit the arcade, and the sound of the piano becomes louder. People all around pause, listening to this song. Pleasantly surprised looks paint their expressions, some seemingly in a trance.

It's still muffled, though, which makes me more interested in finding it.

I spot the store titled "Philocalist," its door wide open, and quickly enter the somewhat empty, small shop. The music instantly becomes clear. It's a soft, dainty tune, upbeat and lively. The keys play meticulously, hitting every note with ease.

A chill shoots down my spine as the keys play a nice, sharp harmony.

Glancing at the counter, I spot an older woman sitting at the register, just nodding away as she taps her pen on the counter to the melody.

Softly, she opens her vibrant, green eyes, and smiles, "Hello there, youngman!! How can I help you today!"

"Hey, uh...who's playing that?" I ask, hating how curious I am.

She softly laughs, her long, silky gray hair sliding down her shoulder, "She's in the back."

She gestures to the other half of the eccentric shop, and I turn toward it. Inching closer, I hear the keys gradually slow down. I look around more, and finally, behind a cracked door in the back, I spot a girl.

The piano quits, and I stop, catching a glimpse of her grabbing a notepad and writing. She quickly scribbles in it, but I can't see her face.

"Finally..." She murmurs, *"I got it right..."*

I tense at the sound of her voice. It's warm. I didn't think someone could sound that pleasant. Tossing the notepad back onto the piano, she sits in thought before resuming, her hands in ready position, "Do I want to play more Mozart?"

She was playing Mozart...

"Or maybe..."

The keys start slow, and gradually, the song begins, different than before. It's a somber and longing piece, but inspiring, nonetheless.

I push open the door softly and freeze. My face burns up when I get a clear view of her.

*And shit, she's, like, really **fucking** pretty.*

02: The Optimist

[image] [image] [image] [image]

SAWYER

Frozen, I watch this pretty girl delicately run her fingers across the keys, creating a lovely sound. Headphones rest around her neck, and her eyes are closed as she continues playing.

I find myself staring, suddenly distracted.

She has short, loose but kinky black hair is pulled back into a messy bun, revealing a few piercings on her ears. Her cocoa-brown skin shines under the room light, and her features are soft, yet pronounced.

A button nose, a round face, and light freckles painting her cheeks. Her lips are full, with light lip gloss on them to make them shine. Her outfit includes a simple black-and-white striped T-shirt, a silver butterfly necklace, and light blue jeans.

Who is she?
And why the fuck am I staring at her like a ***creep*** *-*

I look away, a strange feeling settling in my stomach.

What's wrong with me?

"**Oh my—**"

I look up and see the girl staring at me from behind the piano, shocked. She tugs her baby blue headphones off and lays them on the piano. Her light brown, almost golden eyes meet my plain ones, and my mind draws a blank.

She lets out a small sigh of relief, bringing a hand to her chest. Laughing, she smiles, "My goodness!! I had no idea anyone was in here with me!!"

Her smile...
And her laugh-

My mouth struggles with words suddenly.

Why is my throat so dry?
Is it hot in here? I'm hot.
I think it's hot-

"Hello!!" She waves, "Welcome to Philocalist!! How can I help you?"

I start to reply, but nothing comes out except air. My eyes search hers, and deafening silence falls over us.

Say something, damnit...

"You..." She murmurs, raising a brow, *"alright—"*

"So, ***you're*** making all that noise?"

She pauses, examining her surroundings, "Oh...I think so." She gestures to the piano and snorts, "This piano is pretty loud, so I'd think I'm in charge of most of the noise here!!"

"Yeah. I'd think so, too." I look her up and down, and before I can stop myself, "Kind of obnoxious."

"I'm sorry?"

"**You heard me.**"

I squeeze my mouth shut, searching her confused expression. I clear my throat, "Kind of obnoxious when you're trying to shop and all you hear is a loud piano."

What-I'm not even shopping...

Her face drops, and I instantly feel a way about it. I frown, these overwhelming emotions consuming me. I feel like an asshole. Which, granted, I am one, but what I did made me feel like ***shit***.

I don't know why I said that...

She blinks, that innocent, clueless look on her face getting to me. "Oh." She replies, sounding apologetic, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to —"

"No need to explain yourself. Just be more aware, 'kay?" I interrupt harshly, and she stops, "Not ***everyone*** wants to listen to whatever the hell you're playing."

Oh my god-shut up-

There's another long pause, hurt spilling into her eyes before they softly narrow, thoughtfulness settling into them.

I frown, "What?"

Quiet, she asks, genuinely curious, "Was that all you came in here for?"

I pause, taken aback by the honest question. However, I swallow hard, "Why else would I come in here? To congratulate you?"

She falls silent again, brows furrowing, and face softening with confusion and distress. I am definitely making an ass out of myself at this point, but it's too late.

Finally speaking, she murmurs, "You're **mean**, y'know that? Like really **mean**..."

"**I try, thanks.**"

That heavy silence returns, falling over us like dense fog. A silence that I can't quite explain. It's not entirely awkward, but it's not nice or comforting either. Just intense.

"Now that I've got that off my chest, I'm gonna go." I blurt, breaking the silence, "I appreciate you finally quitting that music. It was annoying."

Not saying another word, I grab the doorknob and shut the door. The sound echoes through the air as I stand at the wooden barrier between me and her.

My mind is racing with all kinds of thoughts, thoughts of ***her*** and what I did.

*What's gotten into me? I... **liked** that.*
Talking and listening to her play, even if it was for a moment. I feel...like a dick-

NO.

I shake that thought out of my head, muttering, *"**Absolutely not**."*

I don't have time for this. She interrupted my day by playing a damn song no one listens to casually. I was supposed to be getting a drink, not investigating something that had nothing to do with me.

I try to push the thoughts of her out of my mind, exiting the shop and arriving at the arcade again.

I glance over at the 'Philocalist' store across the mall, grabbing my lemonade from the cashier and sipping it. A deep scowl plays on my lips as I sit in thought.

Nope. I can't get caught in that.
*I just... **can't** .*

Three days later...

MARIANNE

Why was the King only a foot tall?

I sit in thought, trying to form guesses. Finally, I flip the page to reveal the answer.

Because he was a RULER.

"Ha!!" I snort, pointing at my book, "Hilarious!!"

*" **Ahem** ."*

I look up and spot an older man standing in front of me, frowning. I freeze, taking notice of everyone on the bus shooting me stares and

dry looks. Sudden silence falling over the entire bus as I tug my headphones off.

Guess I was louder than I thought.

I shift my gaze around the ample space and let out an awkward laugh, "Sorry."

I wave sheepishly at everybody, but they all turn away. Well, joke's on them. I didn't want them to wave back anyway.

I nod at that thought, feeling good about it. I sit back in my seat, slipping my headphones back on. I look at my book, flipping through the thick, shiny pages while snickering at the jokes.

"Dad Jokes, Puns, and Scratch-and-Sniff stickers".

I only got this book for the stickers. You could say I'm somewhat of a collector. My ukulele is covered in them, all flower-scented.

Anyway, I got distracted when I started exploring the Dad Jokes and Puns. Like, here's one-

How do you follow Will Smith through the snow?
You follow the Fresh Prints.

Ha! It's so corny it's funny!!

Once I arrive at my stop, I stand up and exit the bus, being the only one to get off.

Turning around, I smile, waving at the bus driver, "Thank you!! Have a good day!!"

He pauses, a confused look on his face as I turn and begin walking. Carefully, I bookmark my page in my favorite book and slip it into my leather purse. Zipping it closed, I grin, happy about the day so far.

It's been great, but I feel like it's about to get better.

My white Converse thud against the concrete as I slip a hand into

my pocket and turn up my music. Immediately, I perk up when it starts, "Oo! I love this song!"

"Fluorescent Adolescence" by Arctic Monkeys.

I dance slightly down the sidewalk, trying not to hit anyone head-on.

I'm walking around town, just sightseeing. Hopefully, I'll be able to find my way back home. I don't really have the best sense of direction, to be completely honest.

But it's okay!!

It doesn't hurt to explore this town despite the issue. It's been ages since I walked these streets.

I've moved here from Washington, D.C., where I've spent most of my life, but I was born in Battle Creek, Michigan. I lived here 'til I was 9, then we moved. However, I'm spending my final year of high school with my best friends.

Mom wasn't particularly fond of the idea, but she reluctantly let me go. I couldn't be more excited.

Since I got here, I've taken it upon myself to explore; see what's changed and what's the same.

After walking for a while, I arrive at a café. I stop to take in the nostalgic view: "Caffeinated Love". My favorite coffee place ever, because it's so unique.

It's still the same after all these years.

I gaze at the odd sign and decor, people buzzing in and out of the one-story building. Taking a deep breath, I take a whiff of the delicious scent, loving the smell of coffee and baked goods.

Suddenly, my phone begins vibrating, and I pull it out of my cargo pants. I read the caller ID, and grin. Quickly, I disconnect my Bluetooth from my headphones and pull them off to hang around my neck.

I answer my phone, pressing it to my ear, "Hey, Daisy!!"

"Marianne, girlie, are you wandering around town on your own again?" She asks, sounding concerned but mildly amused.

"Um..." I hum, trying to sound confident, "No. I'm...I'm at home."

"Right...how far have you wandered off today?"

Daisy Carter has been my best friend for as long as I can remember!! We met in 1st grade and have been inseparable ever since!! She's been there for me for over ten years, talk about wild.

"Whaaa? I'm not—" I try to deny, "in town, like, at all—"

"You're a bad liar, Mari." Daisy giggles, and I laugh.

"Okay, fine. You caught me."

"Thought so. So, where are you?"

I look at the street signs, a breeze rippling through my clothes and hair, "Ummm...let's see...I'm on 16th Street, by Caffeinated Love."

"Cool!! Stay there!! Aunt Cassie, Skipper, and I will be there in a few!!"

"Skipper's with you?"

Skipper, AKA **Joslin Anderson**, is my other best friend I've kept up with over the years.

Her nickname is Skipper because when we were kids, she'd always skip her way to class, recess, lunch, or just in general. Plus, her parents called her Skipper too, so it just stuck. Daisy and I met her in 2nd Grade, and the rest was history.

"Yeah!! She's here!! I'll put her on!!"

After some faint talking and shuffling in the background, I finally hear Skipper, "Hi, Mari!!"

"Hey!! I had no idea that you were back from your camping trip!!"

"Well, I wasn't supposed to be back 'til Friday, as you know, but Mom was tired of the mosquitoes."

I giggle, "I bet she was."

"Alright, girlie, we'll see you in a bit!! Don't wander off!!" Skipper states firmly, and I nod.

"I promise I'll stay right here!! Like the man who can't be moved!!"

"The Script" said it best...

"Daisy, it doesn't bother me as much as you—"

"But this isn't what you ordered. You said Matcha Latte." Holding my cup, she says firmly, her brown eyes narrowed, "This is a Vanilla Cappuccino. Why not tell them that?"

Because I don't like being a hassle, and they're busy...

"They're the same price!! So, I'm still getting my money's worth!! Plus, Vanilla Cappuccinos are good too!!" I shrug, "I can still drink it!!"

"That's not the point, Marianne. The point is, you didn't order this, and it's okay to speak up about it so long as you're not being rude."

"**Preach**." Skipper snaps, sipping her coffee. Setting her cup down, she flips her black, red-streaked hair, "I agree."

"I 3rd that." Aunt Cassie laughs, eating her Apple Pie.

Janine Cassie Newman is my favorite and only aunt. I'm staying with her while in Michigan. She goes by Cassie since she likes her middle name better. She's my mom's sister and they are only two years apart; Mom is older.

I haven't seen her in person in years. Last time I did, she and Mom argued, and it was bad. They don't get along, never have, and with all the recent drama in the family, it's gotten worse. They only talk when it comes to family matters.

I look between them, "Seriously? You really want me to do this?"

"Yes, Marianne!! You always get the wrong thing and never correct it when we go out. You act so shy when you're not." Daisy shakes her head.

Currently, Aunt Cassie, Daisy, Skipper, and I are at Caffeinated Love, enjoying some desserts and drinks. We're eating al fresco, under an umbrella at one of the tables with people sitting at the others.

I ordered my usual Matcha Latte, but they brought the wrong order. Everyone thinks I should tell the cashier what I actually want, and that's a little complicated for me.

"I'll even go with you!!" Daisy offers, flipping her long, straight hair out of her face, "As a matter of fact—"

Standing up, she holds my cup and walks to my side of the table, "**We're going**." I yelp as she grabs my hand and pulls me to stand.

She drags me toward the building, and I protest, *"But **Daisy**—"*

I look over my shoulder at Aunt Cassie and Skipper, and they wave innocently at me, and I pout. After some walking and protesting, we enter the busy cafe.

I stumble to a stop, losing my footing but not completely. I regain my balance, looking up to see Daisy looking around the bustling place. Very hectic.

"Alright, bring it in," Daisy nods and I also nod as she goes on a tangent about how I always take whatever is handed to me, even if I don't like it.

And it's stopping today.

"Okay? Easy!!" She shoves the cup into my hands, gesturing to the line, "Go tell them your truth."

"But I—" I whine, "I'm sure they're busy enough."

"I'll be right here!! I promise!!" She snorts, rubbing my shoulder before gently pushing me.

I stumble, sigh, and glance at the lengthy line. Hesitant, I shuffle toward it and stand at the very end, people walking by and talking loudly. Standing on my tiptoes, I try to peek around the guy in front of me, but he's tall.

And smells nice, like sandalwood and something earthy.

Absentmindedly, I find myself gazing up at him, noticing his hood is over his head, and black wires peering around the edges. He's got earbuds in, smart. It is loud in here.

I glance behind me and find Daisy sitting at one of the empty tables nearby, still texting. She looks up for a moment and gives me a thumbs up with an encouraging grin. I try to return her smile, but it's forced and clumsy.

I look down and tug at my baby blue crop-top while adjusting my silver belly-ring, *"Geez..."*

"**Excuse me**."

Someone taps my shoulder, and I turn around and find a guy standing behind me. I meet his hazel eyes and smile, "Oh, hi!!"

"Hey!! Sorry to bother you like this, but I was wondering if the coffee here was good," The guy replies, his hair slicked back, "I hadn't been here before."

"It's fine!! And yeah!! I think so!! I like their Matcha Lattes!!" I explain, and he smiles, "Plus their Frappes and Cappuccinos!! Highly recommend!"

He nods understandingly, "Good to know!! Thanks!!"

"Of course!"

I turn around, and slowly the line moves up some. I start zoning out, thinking about jokes.

How do you make Holy Water?
*You boil the **hell** out of it!!*

I snicker, "Hehe..."

What's Forrest Gump's password?
1forrest1.

I giggle quietly at that one. It cracks me up every time. Suddenly, I feel another tap on my arm. I look over my shoulder and find the guy behind me staring curiously.

I turn to him, "Yes?"

"I'm Ethan, by the way." He smiles warmly. I return his smile, holding out my hand, "Marianne."

He grabs my hand, "Pretty name!!"

"Thank you."

"Of course."

New Friend?

His eyes search mine for a moment as we let hands go. He scratches the back of his head, a bashful look on his face as he says, "Okay, I'll be honest: I only talked to you 'cause I think you're cute. I've had the coffee here before."

I pause, taken aback, "Oh."

"Yeah. You're pretty. And I needed to tell you that." He smirks, and a part of me cringes.

But I refrain from making a face, "That's...that's sweet!!" I smile awkwardly, "Thanks."

He only hums, openly looking me up and down while his demeanor changes from bashful to something less friendly.

*Nope, **not** a friend-*

Licking his lips, he steps closer, leaving me little space, *"**You single**?"*

I tense up, "Well—"

"Don't tell me you got a boyfriend."

"Actually—"

"You interested in me? I think we'd look great together."

Okay, I'm uncomfortable...

I laugh, mostly out of nervousness while clutching my cup, "I'm...***flattered***, honestly. But, um...I'm not looking for a relationship at the moment."

Let's just say the last guy I was with wasn't the best.

"C'mon, give me a chance." He purrs, stepping closer. I immediately step back, and he whispers salaciously, *"I promise I'll be the **best** you ever had."*

I shakily swallow, my heart racing, "I, uh...I really—"

"No means no."

I still at the low, husky voice reverberating behind me, and Ethan does too.

Ethan looks first, and instantly, his demeanor changes; less smug and more unsettled.

Slowly, I look over my shoulder and find a tall, attractive man, the one standing in line in front of me. Very quickly my gaze settles on his dark brown eyes and I see his hood is off and earbuds tucked into his hoodie neckline.

I notice a silver chain around his neck, a dogtag hanging from it with a rose and the word 'Bibliophile' engraved in it. He's wearing black jeans and his car keys are dangling from his belt loop.

After examining his outfit, I take a moment to study his features.

His jawline is sharp, and his nose is soft and pointed. He has chestnut brown, loose curls hovering just above his eyes, warm olive skin, and light facial hair covering his cheeks, upper lip, and chin.

And out everything I notice about him, I can't shake the feeling that he's oddly familiar. My mind fixates on that thought, and finally I remember-

He's the guy from Philocalist a few days ago.

No wonder...

My eyes widen at the revelation as I examine the man's expression. It's cold, dry, and quietly dangerous. Honestly, if looks could kill, it'd be over for Ethan.

03: Thrift Store Guy

[image] [image]

MARIANNE

I was wondering why he looked so familiar.

I didn't get a good look at him before...

He spares me a glance, his eyes meeting mine. I blink, his dark gaze holding me in place. He quietly surveys me, looking me up and down before nodding over his shoulder, "**Get behind me**."

My eyes widen, ***"I-what?"*** Surprised, I stammer, "Oh-no!! I appreciate it, but I wouldn't want to cut you in line—"

"Do I look like I care?" He snappily interrupts, and I clumsily stop. Stepping aside, he motions for me to go, "**Get behind me; I'm *not* asking again**."

I waste no time doing as he asks. More like demanded, but I digress. I peer around his arm to look at Ethan again, and he looks between us, taken aback but mostly annoyed.

"And you are?" He harshly asks, scowling at the tall stranger, *"Her **boyfriend** or what?"*

The stranger doesn't reply, he only stares, which speaks volumes. Ethan visibly grows more agitated, his expression hardening, "Alright, fine!! Stay quiet!! But listen, I don't care if you're her boyfriend, friend, or what!! I already called dibs—"

"**You can't call dibs on a person, jackass.**" The stranger interrupts, and Ethan stops.

I peer up at the stranger as he says with disdain, "And I'm not her boyfriend. But I don't have to be to say if you don't leave her alone, **I'll kick your ass**. How's that sound?"

Ethan falls eerily silent as the stranger glares, his jaw tight. Tension fills the air, coating it, and I feel unnerved. I swallow, looking between them in anticipation.

Ethan's confidence wavers as the stranger scowls, "Doesn't sound fun, huh? So do us all a favor and **fuckoff**."

The silence between them continues briefly before Ethan turns away. Subtly, he looks over his shoulder, muttering, *"Whatever, **Cortez**."*

***Cortez** ? We have a name!!*
happy dance

Well, a name-ish...

Stepping out of line and storming off into the busy cafe, Ethan disappears into the crowd. Once he's gone, the stranger turns to me, and I, again, feel pinned under his crazy, intense stare.

Which has oddly calmed since Ethan left. I don't miss the way his icy glare and hardened expression subtly ease when our eyes lock.

We stare at one another momentarily, and I blurt, "You're the guy I saw at the mall a few days ago, right? At Philocalist?"

He doesn't respond immediately, his expression still blank. Slowly, however, his eyes narrow as I continue, "I was—"

"Playing the piano, I remember." He frowns, "How could I forget."

I let out a small laugh, "Yeah. I figured you didn't like it very much." Shrugging, I timidly add, "I, um...thank you for helping me!! That guy was insistent, huh?" Laughing mostly at myself, I add, "I didn't think you'd do that."

He gives me a subtle onceover and sighs.

Stuffing his hands into his grey hoodie pockets, he mutters, "It's no big deal." He turns to leave, but I grab the back of his hoodie. Whipping around to face me, he grunts, causing me to let go, "**Don't do that**."

"Right, sorry." I clutch my cup to my chest, "I just...are you leaving?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Well, I wasn't sure!! I know you were in line to get a drink or something, but now you're leaving. I wanted to ask if there was a way I could repay you!! Y'know? For helping me and stuff."

Motioning behind me, I explain, "I could buy you a coffee, tea, boba, or whatever you want!! It'll be on me!! I'm trading out my drink for a Matcha Latte, so it wouldn't be a hassle!!"

"No." He bluntly responds, turning back around. As he's about to walk off, I yelp, "But wait, Cortez—"

He stops and looks over at me, "**It's Sawyer**."

Sawyer. **Sawyer Cortez**.

"Well, Sawyer," I search his distant gaze, "I'm Marianne!! Marianne Parker!!"

He gazes down at me, brows furrowed, but he doesn't say anything. Despite the tension between us, I smile, "It's nice to meet you!! Finally got a name to a face!! For a while, I was going to call you 'Thrift Store Guy'!! Or 'Anti-Piano Guy'!! Or 'Really Tall Guy'!! Or—"

"Did you stop me for something important?" He interrupts snappily.

"Yes!! Yes, I did!!" I laugh awkwardly, "I, uh...I really wouldn't mind getting you something!! I'm sure you've been here longer than I have."

"Yeah, and I said **no**."

"But I—"

"**I don't want anything from you, nor your money**."

I fall silent, flinching a little. Distasteful, he says, "Was that clear enough? And you want to know how you can repay me? **Leave me**

alone. Think you can manage that?"

I blink as he scoffs and proceeds to storm off into the crowded cafe. Once he's gone, I turn around and remain silent, letting out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

Ouch, talk about harsh...

Sitting in thought for a bit, I try to shrug off feeling hurt. But it's still there. I glance behind me at the exit, thinking about him. His short and dry responses. Not much of a conversationalist. He'd be a dry-texter just as he is a dry-talker.

I look at the line in front of me and notice it's finally my turn. I smile, ready to get my hands on my Matcha Latte.

This'll make me feel better...

04: What Are The Odds?

[image] [image] [image]

Three Days Later...

SAWYER

I stare at the box of matcha in my hand, contemplating whether I should buy it. I've been staring at it for ten minutes, thinking about ***her*** again.

Marianne Parker .

A hot feeling swarms my chest at the thought of her freckly face, voice, and kindness to a stranger. AKA me and that prick I had to threaten.

I remember it all too vividly.

I was heading to work but decided to get coffee first. I usually don't go to "Caffeinated Love," but for some reason I did. I was standing in line when I heard a small voice. It took me off guard how *pleasant* it sounded.

Not to mention scarily familiar.

I peeked over my shoulder, and I saw her there. The girl I had yet to stop thinking about was suddenly behind me.

What are the odds?

I was stunned and didn't know how to feel. Let alone *what* I was feeling.

She's shorter up close, has hella piercings, and a belly ring. Didn't take her for the type. She was talking to that asshole Ethan. He goes to my school, always harassing the girls, and annoying as fuck.

So, I knew the vibes were off the moment he had "innocently" asked

about the drinks there. Much to her cluelessness, she answered politely.

Even went as far as to explain how she likes their Matcha Lattes. She smelled nice too.

*A **Citrus** and **Floral** scent-*

God, why do I remember that?

Anyway, when the talking stopped, I figured it was over, which put me at ease. But then Ethan just had to open his damn mouth again.

For some reason, it pissed me off that he was not only being pushy but was also *flirting*. A part of me hated the thought of her and him in that way. I had this urge to kick his goddamn teeth in for being a sleazy asshole.

After the ordeal, I knew I couldn't stay there. Not with her being so close. She was and is distracting and that made me flustered on some level.

Can you imagine?
*Me? **Flustered** ?*

It worsened when I told her my name and she offered to pay for my drink. I needed to leave; getting coffee somewhere else wasn't a bad idea. I told her to "leave me alone," and felt like an ass for doing it.

But truth is...***I panicked***.

Like when we first met. And when I panic, I get stupid and say the wrong things. Not an ***excuse*** but my reason.

My jaw tightens, wishing I hadn't been so harsh. Seeing the hurt in her eyes didn't help, but she creates so many confusing emotions in me, frustrating.

God, I hate that I'm like this...

And you want to know what else?

I'll more than likely **never** see her again.

Which technically is a good thing. That means I can get over these feelings I've developed for someone I've spoken to twice. And to that, I say good riddance.

Still staring at the matcha, I grab four boxes, toss them into the basket, and carry on.

I'm not getting these for any reason besides to try, okay?

I walk to the other aisle and find Donovan skimming through candy. I roll my eyes when he sings excitedly, "Sour Patch Kids!!"

I had gone to work earlier and then decided to go to the gym after. Donovan, of course, tagged along. After leaving the gym, Dad texted and asked if we could pick up some things while we're out. We've gotten the small cleaning supplies, and now we're getting extra shit.

Oh, and school starts back tomorrow, so that's great.

"You don't need candy." I flatly say, and Donovan looks at me. Frowning, he retorts, "Yes I do!! Without it, I can't function!! And don't dare say I have an addiction—"

"Sounds like something someone with an addiction would say."

Giving me the middle finger over his shoulder, he stares at the top shelf, "Kiss my ass." Grabbing a box of gushers, he tosses it into the basket, "I'm sharing them with Peanut."

"Right, whatever. Let's just go."

He scoffs, grabbing two bags of Sour Patch Kids and tossing them into the basket, "Yeah, yeah, I hear ya."

Looking at the basket, he notices the boxes of Matcha mixed with the Lysol and stuff. He grabs a small box of jellybeans, eyes narrowing, and I freeze. I know exactly what he's about to say:

'SInCe wHeN Do YOu DRinK mAtChA?'

His bushy brows furrow, as he tosses the candy into the basket. Reaching down, he picks up one of the boxes of Matcha, curious, "Since when do you drink Matcha?"

Told you...

"Health benefits." I snatch and toss it back into the basket, "C'mon."

I haven't told the guys about Marianne Parker. Mainly because I know how they'd react:

"yOU cRuSHinG oN hER, aREn'T yOu?"
"OooOo, a GiRl?!!"
"AbOuT tImE YoU GOt sOmE ACtiON!!"

Raising his hands defensively, Donovan mutters, "Geez, okay, Squidward."

We make our way to the front of the store, Donovan texting away on his phone and talking about some chick he met online. I listen, staring down at the boxes of Matcha in my basket. My mind drifts to ***her*** again, and that strange feeling consumes my chest.

Damnit, get out of my head...

"**Sawyer Cortez**."

I pause and Donovan does the same. We look up and spot her standing in line in front of us. I frown, instantly pissed off, and Donovan goes silent, the corner of his lips lifting. She bats her lashes at me our eyes lock.

I stiffen, praying by some miracle, there's another Sawyer Cortez around. Donovan's eyes widen, looking from her to me a few times.

Slowly, a smirk slips onto his face, *"Oh shit..."*

"**Sawyer**!!" She chirps, dropping her shit on the counter in front of the cashier. She runs toward me with open arms, and I sidestep her.

She almost crashes into the person behind me, grunting, ***"Oof—"***

"Was that for me?" I ask, and Donovan snorts, covering his mouth.

She regains her balance, whipping around to face me while fixing her hair, "Of course it was!!"

Larissa Kingston. We grew up together, but we were never close. However, in her mind, we were/are besties, two peas in a pod.

She's got the whole school thinking we're an item, and it's all because her dad and my dad were friends once upon a time.

She was recently in New York, and it was rumored that she moved there. My hopeful ass prayed it was true, but as you can see, it's gone unfulfilled. Just goes to show that you should never get your hopes up too high.

"**I don't want it.**" I state, turning around to look through my basket. Adding up the cost of everything, I notice outside of my peripheral that she walks over and stands beside me.

I step away, "What?"

"I've been gone for nearly two months, and this is how I'm welcomed back?" She asks, pouting, "You're so mean."

"So I've been told."

"You always treat me like this."

"Maybe you should take the hint; there's a reason for everything I do."

"You don't mean that!!" She whines, grabbing my arm, "You wouldn't mean such terrible things!!"

I pull my arm from her, "Don't do that."

"I know you missed me."

"**Not at all**."

*"You know you **love** me."*

She swoons, before sashaying her way back in front of me. I watch impatient as she checks out, and Donovan laughs hysterically.

She's always been like this, and it boggles my mind.

*"**Bye, Sawyer!!**"* She blows kisses, *"**I love you!!**"*

I cringe, avoiding the flying, invisible shits. Finally, she fucking leaves, and people around shoot me looks, and I grow more agitated.

Donovan cracks up, clutching his stomach, "Looks like your girlfriend's back in town!! Just when you were saying you'd never see her again!!"

Shoving him, I gripe, "**Fuck you.**" He stumbles back, crying laughing, "Awe man!! I have to tell the guys about this!!"

I'm going to go home, right? Grab my dad's pistol—stay with me—and I'm going to shoot my-

"You ready to check out, sir?" The cashier asks, and I perk up. He stares at me curiously, and I sigh, setting my basket up on the counter, *"Uh-Yeah."*

"Hell yeah!!" Donovan chirps, pumping his fists.

"Jesus Christ, we get it, Donovan." I grumble, "You can stop now."

"But aren't you excited? We own this school now!!" Donovan smirks, as we walk through the crowded halls, "We're finally about to be out this hellhole!! Plus, I hear Senior Year's a breeze!!"

"Yeah, we'll see about that..." I mutter.

"I know you're excited, Sawyer. Larissa's probably creeping around, talking about ya'll's "date" last night." Elias nudges me, and I glare at him.

"She harassed me at a grocery store." I state flatly, "I'll be damned if anyone considers that a date."

"Y'know, I heard she actually skipped town again yesterday," Zachary says, and we turn to him.

I become stupidly hopeful, "Really??"

"Yeah. She's going to Georgia for two weeks to visit family or some shit."

"How come I didn't know? I'm in 'The Know', damnit." Donovan whines, "No one in the groupchats told me."

"Thank god." I breathe, relieved, "I'm free."

"For now. Hey, wait!!" Donovan suddenly chirps, "What does everyone's schedule look like? Do we have any classes together?"

"Uh," Elias mumbles, digging into his pocket and pulling out his phone. He scrolls through it a bit before reading, "Pre-Cal first thing, Econ., Computer Science IV, English IV, Study Hall, Computer Science again, then Strength/Conditioning."

"I'll see you in English and Study Hall then!!" Donovan smirks. He looks to me, "Sawyer?"

"AP Literature, Gov., Art IV, Calculus, Business/Marketing, Physics, Strength/Conditioning."

"Aye!! We've got Art together again!!" Donovan grins excitedly, nudging my shoulder, "That makes four years in a row!!"

"I've noticed..."

"Zachary?"

"I've got English with you and Elias, and Strength/Conditioning with Sawyer and Elias."

"I like it!!"

"I'm so not looking forward to Strength/Conditioning." Zachary groans aloud, shoving his phone into his pocket, "Those workouts never fail to kick my ass, I swear."

"Literally." Elias tiredly replies.

Donovan grins, "I'm glad I don't do any sports!!"

We arrive at my locker, and I pull it open and toss my gym bag inside as Donovan says proudly, "Not doing sports was the best decision I ever made!!"

"And now look at you. You look like a wet noodle compared to us." Elias smirks, and Zachary laughs, "You're probably 25lbs when wet."

"I'm 170lbs!! That's a good weight for a guy my size!!"

Slapping my back, Donovan grins smugly, "Plus!! I've been going to the gym with Sawyer all summer! And picked up some of his workouts. Eventually, I'll be as strong as him. An absolute tank of a man!!"

A "tank" is dramatic...

I give him a look, frowning while Elias and Zachary crack up. I glance from him to his hand, and he moves it, grinning innocently.

"Yeah right. Sawyer's 6'1 and 205lbs." Zachary snorts, gripping his bag straps, "Plus he wrestles and powerlifts. Ain't no way you're going to accomplish that."

"Watch me."

"You're suddenly going to be 6'1 one morning?" Elias raises a brow, and Donovan nods. "And 205lbs out of nowhere?" Zachary holds back a laugh.

"**Yeppers**." Donovan swoons.

"Okay." Elias drawls, smirking, "If you say so."

"What do you think, Sawyer? You think it's possible?" Donovan nudges me.

Closing my locker, I yawn, "Sure, champ. One day you'll magically grow four inches and pack on 35lbs out of nowhere. 'Cause that shit

happens all the time."

Donovan pouts, and Zachary and Elias snicker. Already dreading the day ahead, I shrug, stuffing my hands into my pockets, "I'm going now."

"Bye, Sawyer!! See ya!!" Donovan calls out while I walk away. "Later, bud!!" Elias adds, and Zachary agrees.

I shoot them a nod and head to my classroom, which is thankfully on the 1st floor. Once I arrive, I notice the room is empty; everyone, including the teacher, is still roaming the halls until class starts.

I peek at the time, seeing that it's only 7:50.

I take a seat at the far-left end of the classroom beside a window. I set my bag into the empty chair beside me, and get my notebook, binder, and pencil.

I pull out my crossword book when something catches my eye. I look to my right, seeing a desk with a cup of **Matcha Latte** on it.

I pause, taken aback when I notice funky initials scribbled on it, 'M.P,' plus a smiley-face.

M.P.?

I sit in thought, unsure of what to make of it.

Marianne Parker?

I facepalm, pinching the bridge of my nose in frustration. Of course, that's who I'd think of, dumbshit.

I think I'd lose my mind if she attended this school. However, I've never seen her around, so the chances are slim. Unless she's new.

But what are the odds of that?

I look at the cup, thoughts zooming through my mind as I list as many people with the initials M.P. as I can. The possibilities are endless. I notice a blue bag sitting on the floor next to the desk,

wacky buttons covering it; plus, a light grey jacket on the back of the chair.

Choosing to ignore it, I resume my attention to my crossword. I pull my hood over my head and put in my earbuds.

Slowly, the classroom fills up; the teacher being the first to enter. People take their seats, but none of them take the seat with the Matcha Latte sitting on the desk.

I peek around everyone to see the desk, and there's someone, Daisy Carter, sitting in the seat beside it, texting on her phone.

Maybe it's hers...or maybe-

"**Finally**!!"

I perk up at the familiar voice, and my attention is pulled to the front of the room. My heart races, that strange feeling erupting in my chest when I see ***her***.

She skips towards Daisy, "I found my way back!! All on my own!!"

"Good job!! For a second, I thought you fell in." Daisy giggles as she takes the seat next to her. ***She*** sips the Matcha Latte, "You say that all of the time."

"Well, ***Marianne***, you tend to accomplish weird things sometimes."

05: Major R.B.F.

[image] [image] [image]

MARIANNE

"**I wasn't expecting** the school to be so large." I laugh, glancing around the room at my peers. I shift back to Daisy, "There are lots of students, huh?"

"Yep." Daisy sighs, "This place is always crawling with annoying kids."

"I'm sure they're not all annoying!!" I smile.

I take a moment to look around the room once again. Lots of people. My old school could never. As I continue looking at everything, I suddenly get the feeling that someone is...***watching me?***

I freeze, trying to figure out where this is coming from. I search all faces and slowly turn around.

As soon as I do, I see **Sawyer**.

He's sitting in the furthest corner of the room, with no one sitting next to him. Hood over his head, tuffs of his chestnut brown curls peeking from under his hood and his eyes on me. I pause.

What are the odds?

I give a small wave, smiling slightly, but he turns away, gazing out the window beside him. I blink, not expecting that. I turn back to my desk, staring at my hands in thought.

He turned away.

That shouldn't be surprising, he made it clear he doesn't like me. Plus, he told me to leave him alone. I gnaw on my bottom lip, getting lost in the sauce that is my wild mind. And it was right after

he helped me that he said that, too.

It was a funny situation.

Funny. Yes. But not funny 'haha'. Funny "weird"-

"**Marianne?**"

I look up and find Daisy staring at me, concern written in her eyes, "You alright? You've gone all quiet."

"Oh! Yeah!!" I yelp, "I was just thinking about how school will be here versus back home!!"

Hopefully better...

"It's not perfect, but it's better than...that place." Throwing her arms around me, Daisy presses her face against mine.

I tense up, "**Daisy—**"

"I, Aunt Cass, and Skipper are here for you! We're going to keep you safe at all costs!!" Daisy pouts, holding me close, "Forever and ever!!"

"That's sweet and everything, but you've got me in a chokehold. At this rate, 'Forever' won't make it—"

*" **Forever** ."*

"Shouldn't you be heading off to your class??"

"Mr. Smith can wait."

"And then I walked up to Lucas, and he was all like, 'No, Skip, I'd never', and I was like, 'Like hell, you wouldn't, jackass. Jada showed me the texts between you two. Why would she lie?' Then, he dared to get mad at me because he got caught."

"Oo, girl, you did better than me. I would've raised hell."

"That's frustrating."

"I know!!"

"I confronted him and all his friends about it, and he denied everything. Asshole." Skipper sighs, laying her phone on the table as she opens her lunchbox. Pulling out a small bowl of leftovers, she rolls her eyes, "Men. I tell ya."

"Say that again. I love Jason, but he's a bit much sometimes." Daisy shakes her head.

"Oh hush, Daisy. Your relationship is perfect." Skipper tosses napkins at her, "Jason treats you like a princess. I see you two, and I want to sleep on the damn highway."

Daisy cracks up, tossing her brown hair over her shoulder, "Stop!!"

"I mean it. I'm going to be single forever."

Jason Smallwood is Daisy's boyfriend of three years!! He's 19 and goes to college in Kentucky.

However, he's coming to visit in November, so that's exciting. Daisy and Skipper told me that he's sweet, funny, kind of a dork, and a gentleman. I've only met him over the phone.

Daisy and Skipper continue talking about relationships and whatnot, and I start zoning out. I hum, eating chocolate pudding and looking around the lively cafeteria in deep thought.

I'm not thinking about anything except that time I was playing piano in my old school's abandoned art room, and rats came out of the vents to watch.

It was odd, but in a cute way. I felt like a Disney Princess for a moment, not gon' lie. Cinderella, perhaps.

Those big, beady eyes of theirs stared at me while they washed their mousey faces. There were two of them, and I was tempted to pet them. But disease is something I have been advised not to get.

So, I fed them some cheese from a distance. I had some in my lunchbox. It was so cute!! They were all like-

My thoughts stop when my eyes settle on one person out of everyone in this cafeteria:

Sawyer.

He's sitting across the room, hood on his head and a bored expression on his face.

Three other guys are sitting with him at a circular table, eating and talking. He rolls his eyes, saying something, and they laugh. He frowns before glancing in my direction and immediately meeting my gaze.

Oh no-

I still like I'd been caught, and instantly his demeanor changes from annoyed to stunned. His eyes widened slightly, his jaw set, but within his tense expression, there's a subtle softness.

Something I've never seen before. However, it doesn't last long before his scowl returns.

My eyes drop from his as I stare down at my pudding. I continue eating, timidly looking back up only to find he's still staring. My cheeks flush at the fact and I stare back. This goes on for a few seconds, and he stands up to move to a different seat. Right out of my line of vision.

My shoulders deflate.

That reminds me, I keep finding him staring everywhere. It's been happening all day. That's what I was forgetting. I felt like I needed to tell you something but couldn't remember.

Anyway, all day, I've been walking around the halls with the girls, meeting their friends, having a good time. Then boom, he'll be there. Glaring.

However, it seems like that's just his face. He's got a major RBF, that's for sure. People tend to avoid him; I've noticed that today too.

Like Moses when he parted the sea, except Sawyer's parting the

halls. And it's not with magic or the power of God, it's his face.

I've also noticed that, though he has a bad case of RBF, his face hardens when he sees me, sharper. And he's in almost all my classes, minus, like, two of them. It's weird. And his friends, I'm assuming they are, have been shooting me looks all day too.

Not mean looks, but friendly ones.

They seem nice. Not sure how, or better yet, why they wanted Sawyer to be their friend. He seems like the opposite. Maybe he's nicer than he lets on. Like that mean frown is just a facade.

Of course, Daisy and Skipper do not know any of this. I haven't told them about my encounter with the hunky, mean man. Mainly because I didn't think I'd see him again. Let alone, think we'd attend the same school.

But since he is, maybe I should tell them. See if they know anything about him. Maybe then, we can somehow make peace.

And if things go well, I could even...***befriend him***?

That's asking for too much, isn't it? On second thought, I shouldn't say anything. Keep my increasing interest in him a secret-

"**Marianne, you listening?**"

I jump, looking to my left to see Skipper staring, brows furrowed. I glance at Daisy, who's also staring at me. Sheepishly, I reply, "Oh!! Um-yeah!! You were talking about...sweet-potatoes, right? Yams?"

"No. We were not talking about yams." Daisy giggles, and Skipper shakes her head, laughing too, "We noticed you spacing out."

"Again." Skipper adds, taking a bite of her pasta salad, "You've been doing that all day. What's wrong? What are you thinking about?"

A boy who doesn't like me...

Sitting in thought, I clear my throat and grab my water bottle, "Well...since you asked..." I look between them, eyes narrowing, *"Do*

*you know...**The Muffin Man**??"*

"**Marianne**." Daisy laughs, "We're being serious!!"

"I am too!! Do you know The Muffin Man?"

"You only do this when you're trying to change the subject!!" Skipper rebuttals, pointing at me, "Now, what are you hiding or what's wrong?"

"Is this about Zeke? Is he harassing you again? If so, give me his phone number, I'll cuss him out for you." Daisy gripes, holding her hand out.

I awkwardly laugh at the comment, "No, he's blocked on everything, remember?"

Zeke is my ex-boyfriend. My toxic ex. Just a few months before coming here, we broke up, and it was a nasty one. Hints why I've decided to worry about myself for now.

"Then what is this about?" Skipper raises a brow. Sighing in defeat, I lean back in my chair, "Okay, fine." I look between them, "You guys happen to know Sawyer Cortez??"

Immediately, they fall silent. Their amused expressions morph into uncertainty, and frowns settle on their faces as they exchange an uncomfortable look.

I raise a brow, "What's with the faces? You two look like you've seen a ghost."

*"**Sawyer Cortez**?"* Skipper says stiffly. I nod, adjusting my jacket, "Yeah. I've noticed he's in most of my classes, and...I found myself getting curious. He doesn't seem friendly."

"To be fair, Mari, Sawyer's ***never*** been friendly." Daisy replies bluntly, "He barely tolerates his friends."

"But how are they his friends if he doesn't like them?"

"They just are." Daisy shrugs, "He keeps them around, so they're

friends."

"Okay...who is he?" I ask, curious, "A criminal? A bad boy? A weirdo with weirdo tendencies?"

Sighing, Skipper states, "**Sawyer Cortez** is an insanely attractive and smart asshole who hates ***everything***. He's scored top in our class every year, doesn't talk to anyone, always annoyed about something, sits by himself and/or with his friends, always doing crosswords or reading a book, and is the definition of a social-pariah. Everyone avoids him because he's rude. Plus, that mean look on his face screams unapproachable."

Nudging my shoulder, Daisy adds, "Last year, he made a girl cry because she tripped in front of him. She was new."

"Or that time he told a teacher flat-out he wasn't doing an assignment because he said it was stupid." Skipper shakes her head, "And the teacher still gave him a 100%. Lucky."

"Really?" I murmur, finding all this interesting.

"Yep. He doesn't associate with anyone except Donovan, Elias, and Zachary." Daisy replies, slicking a strand of hair behind her ear, "And that's especially surprising."

"Literally." Skipper nods, "Donovan, in particular, is a mess." Raising a brow, Daisy asks, "But all that aside, why the interest, Mari? He say anything to you or?"

The dreaded question...

Laughing dryly, I reply, "Um...not necessarily."

"Not ***necessarily***?" Skipper echoes.

"I mean...we've run into each other before." I admit, hesitantly, "Like...that time at 'Caffeinated Love' when I told you about that guy who helped me? That was him. Then, that time I was at 'Philocalist,' and I told you this guy said my piano was annoying? That was also him. So technically, he's said something to me, but not recently."

They stare at me like I just committed several crimes, and I stare back wordlessly. I clear my throat, sipping my water while avoiding their intense stares.

Laughing uncontrollably, I blurt, "Haha!! Bonkers, right? Anyway, I was just curious!!"

Daisy and Skipper stare at me crazily, and my gaze falls to my lunchbox. I play with my Kirby keychain, "Why do you look at me this way?"

"That's a lot, Mari." Skipper breathes, "You know that, right?"

"Random fact—" I spout, looking between them, "Dolphins recognize and admire themselves in mirrors!! Isn't that just the cutest thing?"

Thank God for random facts...

"That's...actually really cute..." Daisy giggles, and Skipper agrees.

"For real!!" Skipper adds, "But back to you, what you've just said is a lot to digest. And we'll definitely be talking more about that later, but for now, that only further proves the point we're trying to make."

"Which is?" I murmur.

"**Sawyer Cortez** is an ***asshole*** who'll make you **cry**."

"And if he does, I'm chopping his balls off." Daisy says matter of fact, casually sipping her chocolate milk.

We turn to look at her, surprised at the statement. We shouldn't be though. Out of the three of us, Daisy looks the softest but is actually the toughest.

She once threw her coffee in this guy's face and kneed him in the groin because he wouldn't leave Skipper alone. Then there was that time she gave this guy a black eye and dragged out a room by his hair because he was harassing a girl at a party.

There are more stories, but those are the most recent.

She shrugs nonchalantly, *"Just saying. That'll be on him if he wakes up one morning **sacless**—"*

"**Anyway**." Skipper interrupts, raising a hand, "Daisy is right. If he hurts you, Marianne, we're going to beat him up, so don't get any ideas about befriending, talking to, or anything regarding him. I know you like to be friendly to everyone, but he's not worth it."

I nod, heeding her warning, "So...do you not like him?"

"It's not that. We just...know he's a jerk from what people say," Skipper states, "and from what I've seen. But eitherway, promise you won't get any ideas, okay?"

"**Promise**."

I look at my bottle as Skipper and Daisy talk about what Daisy said only moments ago. I glance over to where Sawyer's sitting, thinking.

They're probably right.
Best not to get ideas about him...

06: Hot & Cold

[image] [image] [image]

MARIANNE

I walk down the hall, schedule in hand, and gnaw on my bottom lip. My nerves worsen as I try to remember where to go, tugging at my jean skirt

I forgot where my class is.

I'm supposed to be going to theatre, but I don't know where that is. I thought I would check in the auditorium, since it was in there yesterday and the day before, but alas, there was no one.

As I walk down the hall, I accidentally bump into people and apologize profusely, *"Sorry...excuse me...pardon me...sorry again..."*

I know what you're thinking,
"Where are Skipper and Daisy?"

I might've told them I'd be fine to go alone because I felt (emphasis on felt) confident that I'd find it. I was lucky enough to stumble across it yesterday, and overly cocky about finding it today.

My confidence only made me realize how wrong I was. I've looked on the 2nd floor, the 3rd floor, and even the 1st floor. And surprise, not there.

Plus, it's not helping that this school is enormous. I'm sure you can fit an entire zoo and then some in here. And my lousy sense of direction is only worsening everything.

"Damnit, I'm getting frustrated." I groan, stopping to look around.

I notice people are slowly disappearing (not *poof* and they're gone) I mean, like, going to class. I frown, adjusting my yellow/ white blouse when I realize I'm going to be late. And I hate being late.

Talk about amazing...tardy-slips suck...

"I'm having a great time..." I mutter, shuffling as people hurry past me. Lips pursed, I continue, *"Such an amazing time...one might think I'm the happiest ever...walking in circles..."*

Looking down at my schedule again, I read my room number, trying to figure out where that'd be in the building. I look up and read the doors and stop. I search the hall and realize I'm on the wrong floor.

Of course.

Why does a school need *more than* one floor? My old school was only one floor high.

"Ugh!!" I huff, blowing a stray curl out of my face, "I've already looked there a thousand times!!"

Whipping around on my heel to head back to the stairwell, I run face-first into someone. Stumbling back, I yelp, ***"Agh—"***

I drop my schedule, losing my footing-

Oh mother of pearl-

My eyes squeeze shut and I brace myself for impact, but before I fall flat on my butt and damage my precious ego, hands grab my arms. They carefully tug me back upright and closer to them.

I stiffen when I'm soon steadied on my own two feet, and a familiar, woodsy scent fills the air.

Wha?

The hands around my arms flex as I squint one eye open, *"I...didn't fall?"*

"**No**."

I still, recognizing that low, gruff tone from anywhere. Opening both eyes, I look up and see **Sawyer** standing in front of me; in all his *Glaring Glory*.

He's wearing a black fitted tee and grey sweats with his dogtag necklace dangling around his neck. A gym bag hangs lazily over his shoulder, and his mop of hair is brushed back, revealing his face and a blank expression.

I blink, unsure if I'm imagining this or not.

Who knows, I could've fallen, hit my head, and now dreaming. Cause either I'm knocked out cold, or the guy who had made it clear he hates me just saved me from falling flat on my tush.

Our eyes lock and his grip on my arms subtly loosen, and his expression becomes less dry.

For the past two days, all he's done is glare at me across the room or the hall and, of course, avoid me. A lot like Monday. Plus, what Daisy and Skipper said only added to the conclusion I needed to make:

There is ***no chance*** of Sawyer and me ever being friends.

Or at least civil.

I am okay with that. Despite wanting to talk to him, I respect his disinterest in me, and my friend's wishes.

However, upon seeing him, I smile, "**Sawyer**!! Hello, you...***guy you!!"***

He frowns, "What?" I give a sheepish laugh, "You guy you. It's a thing, I swear. Look it up."

Totally not something I made up...

"Right." He gives me a once-over, "You say dumbshit and you're not very observant, are you?"

I pause, thinking, and he stares at me, raising a brow. Off topic: he has nice eyebrows. I'm honestly jealous.

"Uh...'Yes' to the first half, and a resounding 'No' to the second. But," I raise a finger at him, "to be completely fair, I didn't think anyone

would be standing behind me when I spun around, so..."

His brows furrow and he scoffs.

Ain't got nothing to say, hah-

Letting go of my arms, he steps back and stuffs his hands into his pockets. I drop my arms by my sides, and we stare at one another in oddly tense silence.

After what feels like forever and a half, I spout, "You seem annoyed."

"I am."

"Why?"

"Because of you."

"But why?"

His upper lip twitches.

Genuine question. I'm not trying to purposely poke the bear, but I'm starting to think no matter what, he'll always be poked somehow. Which isn't a surprise based on what Daisy and Skipper told me, and my observation.

This continues for a second longer, and he grumbles, "Just watch where you're going."

Following that, his eyes drop to something on the floor by our feet. I follow his gaze and see he's looking at my schedule.

In curiosity, my eyes shift between him to the thin paper.

What's he gonna do next...

Bending down, he picks it up and pushes it into my hands. I blink at the notion, and he walks past me, not once sparing me a look or saying 'bye'.

I didn't expect him to, but it would've been nice if he had.

My eyes follow him as he walks down the hall taking big strides. As he gets further away, I get the feeling that I'm forgetting something.

What was it...
I didn't thank him.

"Hey!! Wait!!" I shout.

Geez, he's halfway down the hall already...

He stops walking, letting out a groan. Running around to stand in front of him, I pant, holding my paper against my chest, "I didn't thank you!!"

He stares flatly, "You don't have to—"

"But I do!!" I insist, and he stops, "It's rude not to thank someone for helping you!! I'd feel horrible!!" His mouth squeezes shut as I continue, "You quite literally saved my butt!! And, for that, I thank you!!"

No sore booty for me.

I nod confidently, awaiting his reply.

Y'know? Maybe he'd say something like 'you're welcome' or 'no problem', but no. Silence. Not a singular word or even an audible grunt slips out.

I deflate as he stares with disinterested eyes.

"This...is the part where you say, 'Oh! You're welcome!' and...all that good stuff..." I explain honestly, "Not, y'know...***nothing***..."

"I'm not saying that." He deadpans, "But feel free to pretend I did."

I purse my lips, not happy with that answer, and he scoffs.
Suddenly, the bell rings, and my eyes widen in horror.

Oh no, class just started.

I look at my schedule, ***"Damnit."*** Sawyer notices my panic and asks,

"What's wrong with you?"

"Did you not hear that? Class just started!!" I reply, reading my paper. He shrugs, "Okay? If you're late, just go to class."

"**I don't know where it is.**"

His face drops, "You're kidding." I look back up at him, frowning, ***"I wish**. I have no idea where—"*

He plucks the paper from my hands before I can finish, "**You're hopeless.**"

I pause, taken aback as he reads over my schedule.

Oh.

"That's why you can't find your class," He says crankily, "It's upstairs. You're on the wrong floor."

"I already looked, though—"

"Obviously not hard enough."

I bring my hands together behind my back and my eyes drop to my feet. I shuffle them, *"I was...frustrated, okay?"*

He stares at me dryly, eyes narrowed before he says, "**C'mon**."

I perk up as he walks past me. I stare in confusion as he stops mid-stride and turns to me, "You comin' or what??"

For a second there, all thought flies away in the wind, and is replaced with complete and utter bewilderment, and shock.

Am I losing my mind?

I still, staring at him wordlessly.

He asked if I was going to follow-

"Well?" He says, impatient, and I come back to reality. "I-right!!" I stammer, "I'm coming!!"

I approach him, and we walk side by side. Soon, nothing but the sound of our shoes hitting the floor, and my keychain jingling fills the space. It echoes through the hallway, this silence between us tense, and most of all...***awkward***.

And I don't do well with awkward.

I resist the urge to hum or blurt a random fact to break the icy quiet. Probably better not to say anything.

I glance up at him, as he stares straight ahead, not once looking down at me. His jaw is set, his shoulders rigid, and his Adam's apple bobbing slightly. I examine his side profile, and he's even more attractive up close.

Handsome and pretty all at once...

After a moment, he spares me a look, and immediately frowns, "**What**?"

"You're...helping me..." I reply, "Right? Like...you're walking me to class, or am I crazy?"

"No, I'm not walking you to class," He shoots me a glare, "I'm just casually...walking you to class—**YES**. I'm helping you."

"Oh...I was just needing confirmation. This is...odd."

His brows furrow, "Odd, how?"

"I mean...based on how we met and...everything...it's pretty obvious that you don't like me. But then again, you don't like ***anyone***. So...I'm confused about why you've decided to help."

He doesn't say anything, silent. However, there's a subtle change in his expression, not harsh and less tense, but more all at once. Unreadable. This lingers for a while, and my gaze falls to the floor. I fidget with my rings.

I'm not wrong. We can't act like it isn't the case.

"**Because**."

I look up and find Sawyer staring straight ahead again. He scratches the back of his head, "It doesn't make sense not to help when it's obvious you're completely clueless and lost. So...*why not."*

I gaze at him as he stiffly continues, "And...about...the thrift store and...café..." He gnaws on his bottom lip, "It's no excuse and it doesn't change anything if you're upset, but...sometimes I shoot off at the mouth before thinking. Just saying and...doing stupid shit without realizing. So...what I'm trying to say is...***I didn't mean it.****"*

My eyes widen as he softly confesses, *"It came off that way, I know, but...I didn't mean it, okay?"*

Though he isn't looking at me, I note the sincerity brimming within Sawyer's eyes, plus his tone. It's genuine, almost gentle, but restrained.

He's trying to apologize.

Though clumsy and imperfect, it's honest.
Like he really means it.

That makes me soften, just a little, and I smile before I can help it. Finally looking at me, Sawyer's expression is swarmed with apprehension but still carrying that soft and quiet vulnerability.

He looks away, "**The hell are you grinning about?**"

I giggle unexpectedly.

Sawyer's an interesting character.

For the past few days, he's avoided me. But now, here he is ***helping*** me, and he chose to, I didn't even ask. Plus, he apologized for what happened at Philocalist and Caffeinated Love, which was also surprising.

He reminds me of "Hot & Cold" by Katy Perry. He may put on this mean and cold act, but somewhere deep down, he's actually warm and thoughtful.

Whether he'll admit it or not.

"You're annoying, you know that?" He grits as I laugh, "Seriously, nothing's funny. I have no idea why—"

*" **Thank you, Sawyer** ."*

He stops, and we soon arrive at the stairwell. His eyes widen as I smile, *"For helping me, and saying that. That's...**nice of you**."*

Gradually, his expression lightens a bit, less harsh, and more kind. Soft. I catch a glimpse of this rare sight, and a silent gasp escapes me. For once, the man isn't completely glaring at me.

It's...something else...

Just before I can admire it longer, it disappears, and he frowns, "Whatever, I'm not ***nice***. Let's just...hurry this up."

"Oh, I never would've guessed it was this room." I sing as Sawyer, and I approach the door. "Figured." He mutters grumpily, "Since you couldn't find it."

"Well, now I know!! Thanks to you!!"

"Do you ever stop talking?"

I laugh, and his expression hardens, "You really are grumpy for no reason."

"No, you're just annoying."

"When do you not think I'm annoying?"

He lets out an exasperated huff, and I laugh again. Shaking my head, I state, "You didn't laugh at my jokes!! Those were some of my best!!"

"They were corny."

"I'm going to assume that what you meant was that they were so corny that they were hilarious."

"No."

"Plus, I asked how your day was, and you didn't answer!!"

His eyes narrow, and I suck my teeth, "Rude. Y'know, you may not like me right now—"

"It's more than that."

"Potato, Potahto." I shrug, poking his chest. His frown deepens as he looks from me to my hand.

I smirk, feeling less hurt by his actions and more amused, "You may not like me right now, but I promise you'll get used to me!! Somewhat. I'm pretty cool if I do say so myself!!"

"Of course you'd say that about yourself..."

I move my hand away, "Just you wait!! We'll be civil!! Eventually. But, for now—" I wave, walking to the classroom door, "See ya later!!"

I reach for the door handle but suddenly jerk back.

"Oof—" I stumble, looking over my shoulder to find Sawyer holding my backpack. I raise a brow, "Yes?"

"Your shoes are untied...again." He motions to my feet, letting my bag go.

That's the second time since we started walking. I was tripping on my laces, and Sawyer kept stopping me from faceplanting.

"You're kidding..." I mumble, looking down at my Converse, "Dude, I suck at tying shoes. It's embarrassing..."

*"Good to see I'm not the **only one** thinking that..."*

I shoot him a look, and he instantly avoids my gaze.

I eye him suspiciously, "**Mean**." Leaning down, I tuck my shoelaces, and I stand up, "Thanks!! Now, if you'll excuse me!! I have to get to class!!" I wave, "Bye!!"

Grabbing the door handle, I push it down and walk into the busy classroom.

07: No Big Deal

[image] [image] [image] [image]

SAWYER

I've never been *good at apologies. I suck at them. But I tried. And the crazy part is...I think she knew that.*

The door thuds behind her, and I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

It felt like she knew...what I was trying to say without saying it. And that...is new.

I swallow at the thought.

Not good...

I stare at the door a moment longer than necessary, lost in thought, and recalling my conversation with her. While I walked her to class, I felt this weird fluttery tension.

Mainly because she was so close. She's tiny, comes up just under my shoulder. My mind continues whirling with thoughts of her, much worse than before.

She's a weirdo...

I like it-

Let's pretend I didn't say that.

I shake my head, finding it difficult to focus.

She talked and talked about every and anything. I listened and told her it was annoying, but she kept going. I swear she could talk to a brick wall if you told her to.

And she's never completely silent. Her version of being quiet is

humming. Not to mention, she can't keep her shoes tied to save her life.

She's from Washington but came here to graduate with friends, so I was right: New Student. She lives with her aunt, Cassie I think she said her name is. They're super close from the way Marianne talked about her.

That's not the only thing she talked about, either. She talked about how she thinks this school is too big and how she should've just accepted the help from her friends so she wouldn't have gotten lost.

Somehow, the topic of pudding and Jello came up after. Not sure how, but now I know she likes chocolate pudding and cherry Jello, homemade only. She won't eat it otherwise. Don't ask why I remember.

"**Sawyer**."

I turn to my right and find Elias and Zachary standing at the end of the hall.

"Dude!! You're ten minutes late!! Coach is pissed!!" Elias shouts, and Zachary agrees.

"I know." I mutter, approaching them, "I'm coming." I walk over, and we walk to class side by side.

"So..." Elias murmurs, and I shoot him a look. He and Zachary both wiggle their brows at me, smug.

I frown, "What?"

*"**Who's the chick**?"* Elias grins. *"Yeah."* Zachary adds, nudging my shoulder, *"**Who's the chick**?"*

Walking into the house, Donovan tosses his backpack onto the couch, shouting, "**Sawyer has a girlfriend!!**"

*"**Fuckoff**."* I spit, walking into the house and smacking him upside the head.

"**OW!!**" He hunches over, hands on his head.

"That was mean, Sawyer!! Do it again!!" Elias chuckles, following me. "Yeah!! Do it again!!" Zachary laughs, closing the door behind him.

"Sawyers' got a what?" Evan asks, looking up from the TV while munching on popcorn.

"A girlfriend." Zachary smirks, and I shoot him a look, "He walked her to class, and they were totally flirting."

"She's not my girlfriend." I hiss, and he grins cheekily, "And we were not, asshat. Just because I walked her to class doesn't mean shit."

"Sure, okay. She may not be your girlfriend, but she's ***someone*** to you." Donovan adds, wiggling his brows, "You don't walk just anyone to class."

"It's weird he walked someone to class at all." Evan laughs, looking from Donovan to me, "Since when do you do that?"

"It's not a big deal." I scoff, "She practically begged for help. Completely clueless." Plopping down onto the couch, Elias grins, "Uh-huh. You've been staring at her for the past few days. We've all noticed."

My face flushes and I grab a pillow and launch it at him. He dodges, snickering as I spit, "**No I haven't**."

I have.

Like a fucking creep, and I hate it. Every time she laughs and is somewhere nearby, I'm unable ***not*** to look. She has a unique presence, like her aura fills the room when she enters. It's-

Obnoxious, that's what I was going to say.

That's why I look-

"Wait, it's that girl?" Evan asks, smirking, "Aw!! What's her name?"

"Marianne!!" Donovan chirps, and I whip around to scowl at him, "Skipper told me about her!! She's new, nice, pretty, cute, and hella smart!! I talked to her in the hallway yesterday!! Even got her number!!"

Her number-

"**When**?" I blurt, frowning, and he only smirks, "When ***the fuck*** did you get her number?"

"I'm kidding!! I've never talked to her!!" Donovan laughs, raising his hands defensively. My shoulders deflate as he continues, "But Skipper did tell me about her, and she is cute and pretty!!"

Why does he keep saying that?

"You want some peanut butter for that jelly?" Evan teases.

"I'm not jealous." I roll my eyes, "And she isn't pretty or cute." Walking into the kitchen, I state, "She's a weirdo. As if I'd ever."

"Right." Zachary adds, walking into the kitchen with me. Opening the fridge, he wiggles his brows at me, "Say what you want, but I'm sure any guy would want her."

"Minus me." I state flatly.

"Oh, so you wouldn't mind if I asked her out then, huh? I mean, I'm sure you wouldn't, seeing as you don't like her or anything."

"**Don't even think about it.**" I scowl, looking him up and down.

He chuckles, grabbing a Gatorade, *"Oh? But why not?"*

"She's a pain in the ass, and I'd much rather not deal with her more than I have to. So yes, I would mind." I state, irritated at the thought, ***"She's off-limits."***

"**Jealous**." Donovan quips, and everyone laughs.

"So jealous, it's painful." Elias snickers, "All I took from that was *'she's off-limits because **I** want her'*—"

"**Shut it.**" I grit, and he continues to laugh. Opening a cabinet, I grab a box of protein bars, "I don't want her."

Suddenly there's a car horn blaring outside, and we turn toward the door.

"Oh! Mr. Cortez is here with Peanut!! Let's tell them about Sawyer's girlfriend!!" Donovan chirps, and all the guys agree. I stiffen, looking toward Zachary as he grins at me.

"**Don't**." I sternly say, and his smile widens. There's a moment where we stare at one another in crazy anticipation.

After what feels like forever, he darts out of the kitchen, leaving his Gatorade on the counter, "**Let's go, men!!**"

My stomach sinks, and I drop the box of protein bars. I chase them as they run out of the house, Evan laughing and watching this madness unfold.

Running off my porch, I shout, "**You assholes!!**"

New Message –

***Larissa Kingston** :*
Sawyer!! Text me back!!
I heard you were talking to some girl in the hallway last week!! Who is she?!

How did she get my number? And how the fuck did she find out about that? The girl isn't even in town-

Wait.

I bet one of her so-called "friends" told her about Marianne and me walking together last week. They must've seen us. They stick their noses where they're not wanted in all types of shit.

I block her number, putting my phone away, *"Insane woman..."*

"**Yo**."

I look over and find Elias, Zachary, and Donovan staring at me. "You good? Looked like you were reading something serious." Zachary asks, eating his sausage biscuit.

"**Larissa**." I reply, and they let out sympathetic sighs, "She somehow got my number and is blowing it up."

"Sounds exciting." Donovan drones sarcastically, "Tell her I said 'Hi'."

"Why's she texting you?" Elias raises a brow. "It's about me walking Marianne Parker to class last week," I roll my eyes, "Don't know why that's any of her business."

"Oh-She found out about your boo-thang?" Donovan quips, smirking, "Makes sense."

"Like hell she's my 'boo-thang'. She's no one."

"Have you talked to her anymore?" Elias asks, curious.

"No."

Marianne and I haven't spoken in almost a week. And before you ask, no, it hasn't stopped me from staring. Something must be wrong, cause anytime she's close, it gathers all my attention. Like clockwork.

She'd say something to whoever, share snacks, make them laugh so effortlessly—she has a knack for that—and I am stuck watching. It's terrible.

And anytime she sees me in the hall or in class she smiles and waves. I never wave back, but that hasn't stopped her. She does it anyway.

"When can we meet her?" Zachary bats his lashes. I shrug, "Whenever."

"We don't have any classes with her though." Donovan pouts, "And we only see her in the halls. Seems like everyone's eager to talk to her."

True. The whole school knows and adores her already. She's only been here a week.

"Tough-Tits." I state dismissively. "Looks like she's talking to someone right now." Elias gestures across the hall, "Some guy, and man, are they ***flirty***."

I whip around immediately, but stop when I see she isn't there. I frown, relieved but irritated, and the guys cackle evilly. My jaw tightens and I raise a middle finger at them, not bothering to turn around.

"Love you too, Sawyer!!" Elias laughs, "We'll meet your girlfriend eventually!!"

"**Fuckoff**."

I close my locker and slip an earbud in. Tugging my hood over my head, I storm down the hall, getting lost in the crowd. People step aside, allowing me to walk through as they shoot me looks and whispers. However, I pause when I spot a group of girls glaring.

I pause, recognizing them as Larissa's "friends".

Damnit-

They speedily approach, and when they're close enough, I announce, "The hell you bitches want?"

"Rude!! We're not bitches!!" Elaine, the black-haired one in the middle, whines, "And we came over to confront you about cheating on Larissa!!"

Cheating?

"**Newsflash**—" I deadpan, "Can't cheat on someone you're not with —"

"It's true!!" Chloe, the blonde one on the left, interrupts, "You're cheating on Larissa with some chick!! She's not even pretty—"

"**She isn't some chick**." I grit, irritated at the comment, "And you're

one to talk about someone not being pretty, **Pimples**."

She gasps, bringing a hand to her cheek. Amy, the red-haired one on the right, chimes in, "Asshole!! Why would you say that? She has a condition!!"

"Aw damn-I don't care."

They begin saying a bunch of irrelevant shit, and I tune them out. This is a daily occurrence with them.

When Larissa's around, they play "follow the leader," but when she isn't, they do this. Gang-up on me with the one brain cell they share.

By now, I'd leave, but something catches my attention. I stop, recognizing that light laugh from anywhere-

"I love that meme!! Cracks me up every time!!"

I look past these birds and see Marianne Parker walking down the hall. She's smiling with Daisy, Skipper, and a few other people.

Wearing light blue overalls, she's got a white top underneath, and a pair of white Converse. Her short curls are pulled back by a silver claw-clip, and a cup of iced matcha in hand.

She approaches a locker I'm assuming is hers, and Daisy, Skipper, and the other people wave, saying goodbyes before leaving. Marianne waves back, "**Bye**!!"

Turning to her locker, she yawns, and-

Fuck, now I am too.

Frowning, I try to ignore her, but it becomes nearly impossible when she closes her locker and looks in my direction. As soon as she notices me, she grins and waves. My frown deepens, and she laughs.

Always smiling and laughing. The definition of bubbly, and...***terribly pleasant***.

I shake my head, trying to appear disinterested. I look away briefly, but to my dismay, I notice in my peripheral that she's approaching.

Shit.

I don't want her getting involved with these birds. They'd do nothing but feed her lies and gossip about me and everyone else in this damn building.

And she'd probably say something like, *"Oh, let's be friends,"* and it'd end in fucking disaster.

My jaw tightens at the thought.

I can't let that happen...

"Hey, you listenin'?" Amy waves in my face, "You yawned!! That's so rude—"

"**Fuckoff**." I push her hand away, walking past them. "**SAWYER**!!" Elaine shouts, "Get back here!!"

I slip past people, hastily make my way to meet Marianne, and she waves, "Hi, Sawyer!! How—" I grab her hand and drag her down the hall, "**C'mon**."

She yelps, stumbling beside me, "O-Okay!"

I keep her close, and she grips my hand tightly, managing to match my pace. We arrive in front of our classroom, and I tug her into the room with me.

Once inside, I relax, relieved that I was able to get her away from Larissa's henchmen. I let out a silent sigh.

"What was that for?"

I look down, finding Marianne gazing at me inquisitively. "**Because**." I deadpan, my eyes searching hers.

She sits in thought, "Right...well..." Looking around, she quips, "Check it out!! You've walked us to class!!" She smiles, "Thanks, ma

dude!!"

"I'm not your dude."

"You so are!! It's a work in progress!!"

I frown, before looking down between us, and when I do, I realize I'm still holding her hand. My ears sting, and I quickly let go, "A work and progress my ass—"

"We're working on it!!"

Walking over to a desk, Marianne takes her usual seat up-front, setting her cup down.

Looking at me, she smiles politely, "But, back to what I was going to say before you dragged me away—hey!!" I raise a brow at her sudden outburst as she chirps, "That rhymed!! Anyway-Good morning!! How are you?"

"Fine."

I approach my desk at the back of the classroom. I sit down, put my bag in the seat beside me, and get my notebooks.

I grab my "book of the week" as Evan likes to say:

"East of Eden" by John Steinbeck

"That's good!! You're having a good morning so far, I'm assuming?" She adds, looking back at me from her desk.

I pause, taken aback by the question. Looking up to meet her gaze, I reply, "Uh...I guess."

"Good!! I'm happy!!"

I nod, opening my bookmarked page in my novel. Silence coats the room, thick, and usually, if it's this quiet with Marianne around, it means she's thinking about something to say. She told me that last week-

Don't ask why I remember.

"Hey, Sawyer?"

Called it...

I sigh and look at her. Instantly, I meet her distractingly prett-**REGULAR**-eyes, "What?"

Thoughtful, she asks, "Do you ever get lonely? In class, I mean. I notice you're always working by yourself."

True. I don't work with anyone for anything. I do projects and classwork alone. And if I'm assigned a partner, it won't last.

I don't do well with group activities. People are stupid and never contribute to the project for shit. With that in mind, teachers try to consider that when it comes to partner work. I didn't think she'd noticed that.

"No, I don't." I look at my book, "I prefer working alone."

"Oh, cool!!" Marianne replies, "I was just curious!! I thought...we could be partners for class if you wanted!! But only if you wanted, so..."

Whipping around, I stare at her wide-eyed.

***Partners** ? With **me** ?*
*I've been a total asshole, avoided her, and gave a sorry-ass excuse of an apology. Yet she wants to be **my** partner?*

"Don't you have one?" I ask, bewildered.

"Yes, but no. She decided she wanted to be partners with her girlfriend! She's moving seats today!!" She explains honestly, "I told her it was fine, but then remembered I also need a partner, so...I was thinking I could ask you!"

My brows furrow as she adds, "You're the only other person I know in this class." I blink wordlessly, and after a moment, she gingerly waves it off, "But it's okay!! I'll ask **Giovanni**!!"

I frown.

*Who the fuck is **Giovanni** ?*

Whatever-doesn't matter-The point is I **don't** do partners.

I'll be damned if I start today because of a pretty girl. I work alone. Always have. I lack the patience. Very *thin* patience-

"**C'mon**."

Her eyes widen as I close my book, and motion to the seat beside me, "You can be my partner, but I'm not moving up there; you'll have to come back here."

Instantly, her eyes light up, a happy expression painting her face. Those weird flutters return when I notice her excitement, and she chirps, "Okay!!"

Gathering her stuff, she approaches my desk. I tug my backpack out of the chair next to me, and she sits down. Her gentle scent fills the air when she's close, familiar, and her shoulder lightly bumps mine. I stiffen.

Holy fuck, she's so close-

I stifle a cough.

Why is she so close? Ever heard of personal space?

I rest my chin in my hand, watching as she excitedly takes out her notebooks. The notebooks are all decorated with stickers and music notes. She then pulls out a book titled 'Dad Jokes, Puns, and Scratch-and-Sniff Stickers,' and my brows furrow.

What have I gotten myself into?

"I wasn't expecting that," Marianne says to me, "How surprising."

*You're telling me. I had every intention to say "no" and didn't. And not because I secretly wanted you to sit with me instead of whoever fucking **Giovanni** is-*

"It's no big deal. I said yes 'cause you're probably the only person in this class who does their work."

True. She gets her work done fast, and usually, I'm the first to finish. But over this week or so, she's beaten me and made a perfect score every time.

She's smart as hell, I'll give her that.

She giggles, sipping her latte, "Mhmm!! No a big deal. Hey, you know what this means though, right?"

"What?" I raise a brow, "Didn't think this meant anything."

She smirks cheekily, "Of course it does! It means that some part of you *does* like me!!" My face flushes as she playfully adds, "I knew it!! There's no fooling me!!"

"Please." I stare out the window beside me stiffly, "Ridiculous."

"Oh c'mon!! Some part of you does!!" She teases, "Y'know, denial's a fickle thing—"

"**Keep going, you'll be out of a partner again**."

08: Just This Once

[image] [image] [image]

SAWYER

Maybe it was a mistake letting Marianne sit with me. 'Cause now I can't focus for shit.

I glance at her as she hums quietly, kicking her feet a little. She taps her pencil to her chin as she sits in thought, her lips doing that pursing thing, duck lips.

I've noticed she only does that when she's thinking about something. Or, in her words, "Super-Duper Concentration."

Whatever the case, "super-duper" isn't a thing.

Writing something down, she flips the page to the back and starts reading. Soon, her smile returns, confident as she answers a question.

That damn smile-

I try to ignore the feelings arising in my chest, silently sighing. Glancing around the classroom, I notice people whispering things to one another while looking at us.

I noticed it earlier, was a little annoyed, but got over it. I think Marianne's noticed it too, and unlike me, she has a subtle tick she does; picking her fingers or fidgeting with her rings.

Based on observation, she only does that when there's a lot of attention on her, and currently, there is. But even so, she smiles.

People have been shooting us looks all class. Mainly because, as I said before, I don't do partners. Everyone knows that.

Plus, we're opposites.

She's (not to sound cliché) a ray of sunshine. Smiling, laughing, always happy about something, and just in a good mood for no reason. She waves at everyone, has a good attitude, outgoing, and always asks, *"How are you."*

Plus, she offers kindness to anyone who may need it. Like this guy Aiden-Allen-Archer, some shit. Long story short, he was upset about something, and she sat and talked with him all class-

Moral of the story:
It pissed me off.

Then, she helped a girl find her class even though she didn't know where half her classes were. She's just an all-around nice person.

All the things I'd never be. Cause frankly, I don't care enough. I've been called things that by no means represent her.

Bitter. Callus. Mean. Rude. Smartass. Asshole. Dick. Prick. Pessimistic. Debbie-Downer. And so on.

I look down at my packet, realizing I haven't answered a single question. I've been too distracted by the girl I tried to avoid, who's now sitting next to me.

It's driving me insane.

"Hey, Sawyer?"

I look over at Marianne, heaving an exasperated sigh. We lock eyes, and she searches my gaze, "Do you know what I'd put for question 20? I'm stuck between B and D."

She's already done?

We're supposed to read a passage and answer 20 questions about it. As said before, I haven't started. I read the passage, but that's it.

I look at her paper, reading the questions, "It's D."

"That's what I thought, but B also has key points. Like, Emily ran off with Edgar to follow her dreams, but it failed because she

technically cheated to get there. It also brings up the passage's main idea is 'good things come to those who wait'."

"True, but B negates everything. Here." I lean over, grab her paper, and underline the last part of the answer, "That says that it's only true because she bought the car."

She reads in silence before her eyes light up, "Oh!! You're right!! It does!!" I push the paper back to her as she says, "Good catch!!" She softly smiles, "Thank you!!"

Fuck-

"Yep." I look down at my packet, and trying to remain indifferent.

"Alright class!! That's all for today!! I'll see you tomorrow morning!! If you haven't finished that packet, it is homework for tonight!!" Mrs. Esner says, and everyone starts gathering their shit.

Standing up from her seat, Marianne slips her backpack on and grabs her half-empty coffee cup. I stand up too, grabbing my packet as Marianne stares at me thoughtful.

Staring back, I ask, "What?"

"How tall are you?" She asks, tilting her head. "6'1." I grab my bag, slipping it on, "Why?"

"Cause you're tall."

I have half the thought to say *"no, you're just short"* but don't.

"Random thought-Anyway—" Looking from me to my packet, she asks, "Do you want me to turn yours in with mine?"

"I'm not done."

"Okay!! No problem!!" She chirps, turning around. As she does, however, she trips on her loose laces.

Naturally-

I grab her arm to stop her from falling, and lightly pull her into me. Her back meets my chest and her curls tickle my chin when I lean over her shoulder, "Your shoes are untied, idiot."

"Whoops!!" She laughs, regaining her balance. Looking at her feet, she notices her laces lying on the floor, "Appears so." Looking over her shoulder at me, she grins, "My shoes aren't shoeing the way they should, huh?"

"That's not a thing." I deadpan.

"It is now 'cause I said."

She sassily shakes her head, and I roll my eyes, "Whatever. Give me this—" Letting her go, I reach over her head and pluck the packet from her small hands.

She squeaks, turning to me, "Hey, but—"

"I'm turning it in. Tie your shoes before you fall on your face." I gesture to her feet, walking around her.

I head to the front of the classroom, my peers walking by and no one laying their packet on the desk.

I hand Marianne's packet to Mrs. Esner, and she smiles, "Thank you."

I nod and head back but stop when I see Marianne talking to two guys. One with short, spiky black hair and bushy ass brows, and another wearing a football jersey with blonde hair.

I look between them, as Marianne laughs. The guy with black hair returns the smile, looking at her with his dumb eyes.

The blonde one waves and walks past me out the classroom. The other stays, talking as his eyes slowly trail down Marianne's figure. He subtly bites the inside of his cheek, nodding along with Marianne's words and obviously thinking about something else.

My jaw tightens, the urge to deck this guy in the mouth very strong. I don't like the way he's looking at her.

Hold on, I know him...

Dorian Lewis. A theatre kid who plays Football, and everyone likes him. Minus myself. I think he's an asshat. Mr. "Golden Boy" who's a spoiled dickhead and likes to spend Mommy's money.

I had the misfortune of growing up with him. He and Larissa are cousins, so there's that. I never liked him. Even as kids. And now I really don't like him.

Slowly, he looks in my direction, and a smug grin comes to his lips, and I grimace.

He knows what he's doing...

"Anyway!! Thanks again!! I'll see you around!!" Dorian waves, grabbing his bag. "Okay!! See ya!!" Marianne waves, smiling.

He soon approaches me, that stupid smug grin still on his face. I stare daggers at him once he in front of me.

My glares hardens, and he says innocently, "Hey, Sawyer. Long time no see."

"**Piss off**." I spit, and he laughs. He shakes his head, raising a brow, "That's harsh, I was just trying to make conversation."

"Don't play dumb."

"Still holding onto petty grudges, huh?"

"Grudges, my ass. What did you want with her?"

He glances over his shoulder at Marianne before looking back at me, "Who, Marianne? Oh, nothing!! My friend, Jamison, and I were just talking to her!! You didn't seem to like that, though, huh? Weird. Y'know, Larissa would be throwing a fit right about now if she knew—"

"We don't have shit going on." I snap, "And she's not in town, why does that matter to you? Last I checked, you and Larissa don't talk."

"True, but I'm just saying for Marianne's sake. We both know how Larissa is, and Marianne doesn't." Leaning in closer, he smirks, "Plus, she doesn't know what everyone else already knows about you."

My fists clench, and instant dread settles in.

They don't know shit...nothing...

Angry, I bite out, "Maybe a repeat of what happened last time will get you to fucking leave, don't you think?"

We didn't fight, but I did punch the shit out of him last year. Right in the mouth. Busted his lip for not shutting when he should've.

I would've done more, but I decided against it. I've got a history of fighting under my belt, and I made a promise not to do that anymore.

Anyway, Dorian kept his distance after that, and so did his followers. He only glared at me from across the hall. Pathetic bastard.

His expression grows serious, his confidence starting to waver. I hold his gaze while he clears his throat and tugs at his flannel, "Threaten me all you want, Cortez, but we both know the truth."

"Yo, Dorian!! You comin', bro?"

I glance over at the doorway and spot the blonde guy standing there.

What did Dorian say his name was?
Jamie? Johnathan?

I notice he's not alone; he's with some other guys. And of course, they're all wearing those dumb football jerseys.

"Yeah!! Give me a sec!!" Dorian fakes smiles, before giving me a dry look, "Don't forget who you are."

Finally, he pushes past me and exits the room. I grit my teeth,

pissed off by that. I shift my attention to Marianne who's tying her shoes. Anxiety starts to settle in the longer I look at her, and I recall what Dorian said.

"She doesn't know what everyone else already knows about you."

Once she's done, she looks up and instantly grins while skipping toward me, "Oh, you're still here!!" A playful look comes to her face as she nudges my shoulder, "Were you waiting for me? Aw—"

"**How do you know Dorian?**" I blurt, and it comes out a little harsher than intended.

Her face drops, her lips doing that pursing thing, "Hmm?" She brows raise, "Oh! You know Dorian? Cool!! I don't know him!! Not really!! His friend asked me for help with the assignment, then Dorian came in to walk with him to their next class. Then he joined to help!! Super sweet!!"

"Sweet my ass." I scoff bitterly, "What'd he say?"

"We were talking about class, that's all." She replies, confused. A part of me eases, but I still don't like this.

I don't like the way he looked at me nor what he said.

He better not say shit to Marianne about anything. He doesn't know, only rumors and lies. She deserves to hear it from me; someone who's been through it.

My throat dries the longer I think about it.

I want to bury it...forget it...and let it disappear-

"You okay?" She asks, pulling me from thought. I blink, seeing she gazing up at in concern.

"...yeah. He's just...a jackass. Can't stand him." I mutter, deep in thought. Instantly, her expression becomes wary, "You don't like Dorian?"

"**Hate him**."

"Oh...why?" She asks as we walk out of the classroom side by side. I don't reply right away, and she quickly stammers, "Or is it personal? If so, then you don't have to answer—"

"It's nothing personal. I just don't like him."

She falls quiet, looking at the floor, *"Oh...**I'm sorry**."*

I stop, turning to her. She stumbles, and I grab her arm to stop her. Finding her footing, she breathes, *"Woah—"*

"What'd you say?" I ask, my grip on her arm firm but careful not to hurt her. She turns to me, staring like a deer in the headlights, *"**Sorry**?"*

Trying to understand, I ask, "What-Why...are you sorry?"

"Because you don't like him, and I asked about it." She explains softly, "You seemed upset, and I felt bad for...well, making it worse I think." Softening, she mumbles, "No one likes talking about things that upset them, right? So...**I'm sorry**. Am I not supposed to?"

Silent, I stare at her, noticing the way her eyes search mine with genuine sincerity and guilt. And just like that, my grip on her arm loosens.

She's being serious.

Something in me stupidly warms at that; at how kind she is. She apologized when she did nothing wrong.

She's such a...

Damnit, my ears are burning-

"You're so dumb." I rub my face, *"You're just so...**pretty**...and dumb..."* My cheeks flush and I let her go, *"And...no. You're not supposed to apologize...you have nothing to be sorry for...'kay?"*

I glance back at her and find a beaming Marianne. One big, fat, dimply grin.

I call her dumb and she smiles?

"Why are you smiling?" I ask, exasperated, "I called you dumb; that's not a compliment."

"You said I was ***pretty*** though!!" She says brightly, and I pause, "And I think, just maybe, calling someone ***pretty*** is a compliment!!"

I did...I did call her pretty-

"**I hate you.**" I grumble, attempting to sound serious, but soften when she giggles, "I do. So much."

"So Matcha?" She adds, holding up her drink, *"You hate me so **Matcha**? Or...a **Latte**?"*

Unimpressed, I facepalm, *"Good God..."*

"Bahaha!" She laughs hysterically, "You gotta admit, those were good!!" She slaps a hand on her knee, "A real *knee-slapper*!! Awe man, I'm on a roll!!"

"You're not."

"If it makes you feel any better, I think you're pretty too!!" She nudges my shoulder, wiggling her brows, "Super pretty!! Like, you're living proof that milk really does do the body good."

My cheeks flush, "Quit that shit."

She's so corny...

"Am I making you flustered?! Oh my god, I am!!"

I turn away as she laughs, grabbing my hoodie sleeve and burying her face into my arm. I look down at her, and surprisingly I'm not bothered by this.

I don't mind...
And I don't think I ever will...

I grumble at that thought, "**You're a damn brat**."

The bell rings signaling next period is about to start. In other words, we're going to be late. I look around the halls, noticing people hurrying to class. I look at the laughing idiot, and she notices the bell too.

I give her a onceover as her hands slide off my hoodie, "C'mon, we're going to be late because of you."

I stuff my hands into my pockets and start walking. Catching up, Marianne walks alongside me, smirking, "Right!! Ma bad, bro!!"

"Don't call me that."

"It is good, but...favorite? The best?"

"That's sad, Zach. I can't disagree with Don on this one."

"If nobody's hurt you yet, they will once they find out your favorite is Vanilla."

"Why?"

"Because they'd be pissed off that you said that. 'All-Natural Vanilla Ice Cream is my favorite'-oh, shut up!! You're not real!!"

"You're never going to let him live this down, are you?"

"Never!!"

"I stand by what I said!! All-Natural Vanilla Ice Cream is s-tier!!"

"Basic bitch."

"Judgmental whore."

"Yo, Sawyer, you're, like, staring hardcore at something. Is it Dorian? Say the word, we'll tag-team him."

"What?"

I look over and find Donovan, Elias, and Zachary all staring. Donovan sits across from me, eating Sour Patch Kids, "You good?" Sounding concerned, he then asks, "Are you thinking

about...**her**...again?"

They all nod, empathetic, and I shake my head, "No...definitely not. I'm fine."

Clearing my throat, I stare down at my tray, raking my plastic fork through what I think is broccoli. I avoid their piercing stares, sit in silence, and clear my throat.

Nosy bastards.

They suspiciously exchange looks after a moment.

"Righttt." Donovan drawls, before looking over his shoulder and instantly smirking. He turns back to me, and I glare when he swoons, ***"I see you, Sawyer!"***

Setting my fork down, I grumble, "Don't fucking start—"

"You're staring at Marianne Parker, huh?" He teases, and the guy's 'Oo' and 'Ah', "Miss Popular?"

"I'm not." I rebuttal, "Why would I?"

I sneak another glance around him and see that she's still standing in lunchline with Daisy and Skipper, talking. She's holding a lunchbox and so is Skipper as they travel through the line with Daisy.

I notice something's different about her. She took her hair down. It was pulled up earlier.

"**Invite her to sit with us**."

I turn to Donovan, taken aback by the suggestion. He blinks innocently at me, and I grimace, "No."

He frowns, "We want to meet this girl you're so interested in. Plus, she's right there, why not?"

"Yeah, Sawyer!!" Elias whines, pouting. "Stop gatekeepin'!!" Zachary adds, sipping his milk.

I scoff, "I'm not 'gatekeepin,' and I'm not interested."

"Okay Mr. 'I'm not interested.' As if you weren't shamelessly staring a minute ago. Stare any longer, I'm sure you would've gotten a boner." Elias tosses a fry into his mouth, and the guys laugh.

I glare, "**Fuck you.**"

"Someone's defensive!!" Zachary chortles. "If you don't ask her, Sawyer, I will." Donovan grins.

I narrow my eyes, "You won't."

"Wanna bet?"

We stare at each other in intense silence, neither of us saying a word. He grins evilly and I scowl, trying to predict his next move.

This lasts longer than expected but quickly ends when Donovan looks over his shoulder and shouts, "**Oh Skipper, Daisy, Mari—**"

*"**You shit-stain.**"* Reaching across the table, I smack him upside the head, *"**Shut the fuck up.**"*

"**Oh-Owie!! It's too late!!**" He winces/laughs, holding his head. The guys cackle while Donovan hisses in pain, gesturing over his shoulder, "**They're already looking**."

To my horror, I look and find Marianne, Skipper, and Daisy looking in our direction from the lunchline. Other people are too, but they don't matter.

I stiffen, pressing my tongue to the inside of my cheek, "Donovan, I'm going to kill you."

"This is beautiful." Elias claps, *"Sawyer's blushing big-time."*

"**Shut your face**."

Skipper's eyes narrow and so does Daisy's, but Marianne stares curiously.

I've known **Daisy Carter** and **Skipper** (Joslin) **Anderson** for a long time. However, we were never friends. We've never talked, but they've been in a few of my classes over the years. I don't know them well, and neither do Zachary and Elias.

But Donovan does. Well, he knows Skipper.

I swallow hard, as Daisy grabs her tray, and they approach our table. My attention narrows in on Marianne as she smiles, saying something to Skipper.

I shoot the guys a glare and they all smirk triumphantly, "I hate you all—"

"**Donovan Harris**, **why are you yelling**?" Skipper blurts.

We look up and find that she, Daisy, and Marianne are standing in front of our table. It's not long before Marianne waves at me, and I only stare sourly, hating this.

Donovan smirks, "Well, Miss Anderson, it's because I can. Gotta problem?"

"What do you want?" She asks impatiently. I glance at Donovan who spares me a sneaky look while explaining, "Well, if you *must* know, why don't you ladies sit with us today!! Figured I'd ask!"

This bitch-

He gestures to the three empty seats around the table, "Y'know!! Get closer as friends!! Figured we might as well mix and mingle!! Have our friends meet each other officially!!" Looking at Marianne, he adds, "Plus, I figured we could get your friend here settled into the school!! You did say she was new, right?"

"Yeah, but why would she want that?" Skipper narrows her eyes, "She doesn't know who you are—"

"I'd love to!!" Marianne sings brightly.

Everyone turns to her, startled by the outburst, but I, on the other hand, am not.

I think I've been around her long enough to know that that's her personality. Just yesterday when we took a shortcut to class to avoid the crowds, she randomly started singing,

"Secret tunnel!! Secret tunnel!! Through the mountain!!"

Daisy and Skipper stare as Marianne exclaims, "That sounds fun!! We totally should!! You already know them, I want to meet them too!!"

"I only know him because we live in the same neighborhood..." Skipper admits stiffly, frowning.

Taking a seat next to me, Marianne looks up and smiles. I tense up at how close we are, damn near shoulder to shoulder. But I try to act indifferent.

She looks back at Daisy and Skipper, "C'mon!!" Exchanging a look, they sit down in the other seats, skepticism on their faces.

"Great!!" Donovan grins, looking to Marianne, "You must be the one and only Marianne I've heard so much about from Skip!!" Nodding, Marianne smiles, "Yeah!! That's me!! And you're Donovan, right?"

"Oh, please, call me Don." He winks, *"No need to be so formal."*

I frown at his flirty tone, my jaw tightening when Marianne giggles.

"Quit flirting, Don. Good lord." Daisy snorts, rolling her eyes, "She's not interested."

"Seriously." Skipper agrees, opening her lunchbox.

Marianne nods kindly, "Don. I like that!!"

I give her a look, to which she doesn't notice, and now I hate this a lot more than I did before. Like, a **shit-ton**.

*She likes that? Oh, **hell** no-*

Leaning forward, I stretch my foot over to Donovan's under the table and stomp it. He jumps, his face scrunching up as he cries,

"**Oh-Ahhh—**"

Everyone shoots him looks when he hunches over and grabs his foot under the table, *"**Motherfuck—**"*

"You okay?" Marianne asks, sounding concerned.

"He's fine." I reply, smug as I eat a carrot, "Just dramatic." Glaring at me, Donovan hisses, *"**You di—**"*

"I'm Elias!!" Elias interrupts, waving at Marianne. "And I'm Zachary!!" Zachary smirks.

"Nice to meet you!!" Marianne waves. Gesturing to me, Zachary smiles, "And this is—"

"**Sawyer**." Marianne says softly, looking at me. Our eyes meet and she smiles that smile at me, "I already know you, Sawyer!! We have class together!!"

The guys shoot me stupid looks, wiggling their brows and I resist the urge to flip them off.

Looking to Daisy and Skipper, Marianne says happily, "He's also my partner for Literature!! He's super smart!!"

"**Your partner**." Everyone gasps in unison. Minus Marianne and myself of course.

I narrow my eyes at the guys as they gawk at me in shock but mostly amused. Skipper and Daisy look between us, their jaws on the floor.

"Really?" Zachary raises a brow, "Is that true?"

Everyone looks to me, and I become irritated.

Great...

"It is." I reply stiffly, looking down at my tray as I grab my fork, "What about it?"

Mouths agape, everyone exchange looks in silence. However, it's short-lived because an uproar of questions starts soon after. They talk over one another, commenting on how weird it is to hear that I have a partner for class and working with someone at all.

Awkwardly, Marianne rambles to everyone; trying to explain. I glance at her and inwardly soften. Her freckled cheeks flush and despite her brown skin, I can see it. She plays with the few, dainty rings on her fingers, fidgeting with her hands while her short, thick curls bounce with her movements.

I can't stop looking at her...

How annoying.

"This is so...odd." Donovan says, barely hiding his excitement, "Sawyer's...well...**Sawyer**."

"**Wild**." Zachary laughs, looking between us, "He never lets anyone work with him."

*I don't, but...I guess I can make an exception for **her** .*
*And only **her** .*

Just this once.

09: Wacky? Is She Tacky Too?

[image] [image] [image] [image]

MARIANNE

"**Did you know** that Avocados aren't vegetables? They're fruits."

"Wait, really?" Daisy raises a brow, "You're lying."

I shake my head, gnawing on my bottom lip, "Nope. And what's weirder is that Avocados are single-seeded berries and are related to sassafras, the bay-laurel, and all types of cinnamon trees."

"Oh, I didn't know that—"

"**She's trying to change the subject.**" Skipper interrupts, walking on my left side, "Don't fall for it, Daisy."

"Oh-You're right!!" Daisy says seriously, pointing at me, "Almost had me there!! You're trying to trick me!!"

I laugh loudly but soon realize I'm the only one laughing. Instantly, I cough into my arm, looking down at my feet, "Ahem-Not...funny, I'm guessing..."

Fun facts to the rescue.

Even though it didn't work...

I told the girls about Sawyer being my partner for Literature and walking me to class, and well...they're surprised by everything just about. It's apparently unheard of for Sawyer to do that. Plus, it doesn't help that I was told **not** to talk to him in the first place.

Technically, I ***didn't***.

Sawyer offered to walk me to class, apologized, and things spiraled. But am I responsible for continuing our interactions?

Yes. Yes, I am.

Anyway, we had lunch with the guys, and it was fun!! Sawyer's friends are super funny and total weirdos like me!! I had a fun time, and so did the girls!!

Now they're trying to wrap their heads around Sawyer and me being partners. And potentially friends?

Not really, but one step at a time.

We're walking around the mall, heading to "Philocalist," aka my part-time job.

"Didn't we say ***not*** to get involved with him?" Skipper frowns, nudging me, "Didn't we say ***don't*** get any ideas? And now he's your partner?"

"Yes!! You said all those things and more!! But I'm telling you, he's not as bad as you think!!" I reply, looking between them, "I told you he apologized-*ish* for what he said. Plus, you sat with him at lunch today!! Sure, he's grumpy, but he's not all bad!!"

I'm so sure of it.

"Yeah, he didn't seem too bad..." Skipper mutters, thoughtfully, "I'm just trying to process all of this."

"It's a lot." Daisy adds honestly.

"It is. But...I made a new friend-*ish*!! Like you suggested!! Sure, he isn't the first option you'd pick, but a friend!!" I reply as we arrive in front of 'Philocalist.'

"Well...alright." Skipper sighs, "I'm trusting you, Mari." Daisy nods, slipping her phone into her purse, "I am too. We'll give him a chance."

Giddy, I hug them, "Yay!! Thank you!"

Walking into the thrift shop, we find Francis behind the counter, as usual, listening to her record player play jazz.

I wave, "Hey, Francis!!"

"Hey, Marianne!!" She chirps; her long gray hair pulled back into a ponytail. Looking at Daisy and Skipper, she smiles, "Hey girls!! How are you darlings today?"

Francis Moretti is the owner of Philocalist. I've known her a long time, she's a family friend. She was Aunt Cassie's and my mom's nanny at one point and even became mine for a little while.

She's a piano teacher and taught me how to play. Well, she and my dad did. Now, she's retired, and to keep herself busy, she bought this shop. She still teaches occasionally.

Daisy, Skipper, and I help here whenever we can besides it being my part-time job.

"We're doing good! Happy that we finally got to visit you since school started!" Daisy grins as we make our way to the counter. Sighing, she leans against it, "School's hectic."

"You're telling me." Skipper agrees, also leaning on the counter, "I'm so ready to graduate."

"Haha! Well, I assure you, it'll get better," Francis laughs, "You'll be done in no time!! What about you, Mari? Is school tiring you out as much as Daisy and Skipper?"

"Nope!" I shake my head, "I love it!! Everyone is nice!! And I'm making new friends!! It's good to finally have a fresh start!!"

Compared to what school I was going to before...
The drama...the people...

I smile, ignoring that thought, "It's better here than there. That's for sure."

"Yeah. She's already friends with, like, everyone and she just got here." Skipper giggles, rubbing my shoulder.

"I'm glad!! I was worried about the transition, but you're handling it well!!" Francis smiles sweetly. Walking around the counter, Francis

approaches us, "Now give me a hug!! I've missed my girls!!"

We all gather around and pull Francis in one big hug.

She's a tiny lady.

"We've missed you too!!" Skipper, Daisy, and I sing in unison. We stay like this briefly before I blurt, "Oh!! I learned something new on the piano!! Wanna hear?"

"Liar."

"I do have that many."

"You don't."

"I can prove it."

Immediately, Sawyer's eyes narrow, and I stare back with the same expression. After a moment, he says suspiciously, "Okay."

Sawyer and I have been sitting together in class for a week now. Isn't that cool? I think I'm starting to grow on him. He's still a big ole grump, except now, he talks to me about stuff other than class.

It's short-lived, but we're making progress.

We're in 2nd period and finished our assignment earlier than anyone else, so we're just talking. Surprisingly, he asked me to be his partner in this class too.

While we were talking, he seemed particularly interested in my book 'Dad Jokes, Puns, and Scratch-and-Sniff Stickers'.

He didn't like the dad jokes or puns, but that's okay. I also told him about my sticker collection, which consists of 2,900. He refuses to believe I own such an amount.

"Okay!! Prepare to be proven wrong!!" I grab my phone and scroll through my photos.

Finally, I find the picture of me, Aunt Cassie, Skipper, and Daisy

standing in front of a pile of stickers. They helped me. I remember that day so vividly because it was the day before school started, my birthday, and we were watching Clueless.

Showing Sawyer my phone, I say, "See!! I even wrote it down on a clipboard!!" He stares at the screen momentarily, "Not convinced."

I huff, laying my phone on my desk, "Hater."

"What's this obsession with these stickers anyway?" He raises a brow, "Why collect them?"

I sit in thought for a moment, remembering how this little obsession started in the first place, ***"Nostalgia."***

Smiling a little, I reminisce, "When I was a kid, my dad always gave me scratch-and-sniff stickers, strawberry scented. I asked him once why he always had them, and he replied, 'I think they're cool and neat. The smells are nice, too'. He always had odd stuff, and the whole collecting stickers stuck with me."

I thought it was cool, so we collected them together.

Our goal was to collect 5,000 stickers. Not sure why that specific number. We went to thrift stores all over and always found a bunch there. Going to thrift stores to find them was essential. We collected 2,700 stickers before...

He left.

I could've stopped, but I chose not to and turned into something for me.

"Hm." Sawyer hums, thoughtful.

"Yeah. Pretty cool, huh?" I smile, "Hey!! Do you have any weird obsessions, too? I know I can't be the only one."

"You are."

He resumes his crossword puzzle, and I narrow my eyes.

"What about those crosswords you're always doing?" I ask, motioning to his book. I watch as he finishes yet another page and moves on to the next, "That's kinda odd."

It most definitely is. I don't know anyone who loves crossword puzzles more than Sawyer. He always has that book and works on it. Even during lunch he's playing a crossword puzzle on his phone.

He shoots me a look, "Not as odd as collecting scratch-and-sniff stickers and Dad Joke books—"

"Hey, I only have one Dad Joke book; thank you very much!!"

He rolls his eyes, resuming his crossword puzzle, "Right."

I nod confidently, sipping my Matcha Latte, and he shakes his head, unamused. I giggle, looking at my cup to see what's left. Instantly, I frown, *"Awe man..."*

"What are you 'awing' about?" Sawyer asks, and I show him my empty cup. I pout, "I'm all out!! This is the saddest part of my day!!"

"Saddest?"

"Yeah!! My favorite drink is gone!!"

"Dramatic." He deadpans, "It's not *that* sad."

"Of course you'd say that!! You don't know what it's like!!"

"Mmm...not the slightest..."

His gaze settles on my cup and after quietly staring, he asks, "Want me to throw that away?"

I pause, blinking at him in surprise at the offer. In return, he only stares at me blankly and his tone dry and disinterested.

I can't tell if he's serious.

I look from him to the cup, "Um...well, you don't have to!! Only if you want to!! I mean, I could—"

"**Just give it to me**." He interrupts, but his tone isn't harsh; it's calm. Taking the cup, he stands up and makes his way to the front of the class. People stare as he goes, including myself.

He's so odd...
But, like...in a cute way...

"Psst!! Hey!!"

I jump, looking around the mostly quiet classroom.

What was that?

*" **Over here** ."*

I look to my right and find one of my peers looking at me. I smile, "Oh! Hi!!"

"You know he's with someone, right?" She motions to Sawyer, "She's coming back today."

Sawyer has a girlfriend?
He's never mentioned that before...

"Oh, uh, no, I didn't." I reply, confused about why that's important. Then, it dawns on me why she'd say that, *"Do you think Sawyer and I are, like, together?"*

She stares at me dully, and I await an answer. When she doesn't reply, and I sheepishly explain, "No!! We're just bros, that's all!! Although he doesn't like being called bro, we're working on it!!"

"What?" The girl says flatly.

"Sawyer doesn't like anything that isn't his name, but we'll get there one day!!" I laugh a little, "But yeah!! We're just partners for class!!" Holding out my hand, I smile, "I'm Marianne, by the way!!"

She looks from me to my hand, frowning, "Amber."

Doesn't do handshakes, I guess...

"That's a pretty name!!" I smile, laying my hand in my lap, "I have a friend named Amber!! She lives in New York!!"

"New York?"

"Yeah!! She's going to work for companies like New York Times!! Pretty cool—"

"**I've lost interest**." Amber interrupts, raising a hand. I stop, my mouth shutting as she continues, "Listen, you seem nice, and you talk a lot."

Flipping her hair, she leans in to whisper, "But just so you know, Sawyer ***isn't*** the guy you want to hang around. He's, like, crazy. Plus, an asshole, and taken. You're new here, that's too obvious. So, friendly warning: ***watch yourself***. If Larissa found out about this—"

"**She'd what?**"

Amber eyes flit above my head, and they widen instantly.

After a moment of confusion, I slowly look over my shoulder and find Sawyer standing there. He's peering over me, hand gripping the back of my chair, and staring daggers at Amber.

His clean, woodsy scent perfumes the air, and my face burns up at our proximity. His aura is quietly intense, threatening even, and his gaze sharp and cold. Amber falls eerily silent, her face flushing. I look between them, shrinking into my seat as they glare at each other in thick silence.

Impatient, Sawyer asks, "What? Can't talk? You sure had a lot to say a minute ago."

"I wasn't talking to you—"

"**You are now.**"

Amber's mouth snaps shut, and he continues, "So, mind turning the other way instead of annoying me and my partner? Then you can go back to ***not*** talking to me."

Tense silence fills the space between them again, as they glare at each other. Looking between us one last time, Amber huffs and turns away.

As soon as she does, the bell rings, signaling that class is over, and everyone gets up to leave. Standing up, I look at Sawyer as he gathers his things.

Grabbing my backpack and lunchbox, I softly state, "That was ***harsh***, don't you think?"

"She was stirring up drama." He says dryly, zipping his bag closed, "Not my fault."

"Still."

I don't say anything else, and he shrugs indifferently.

Grumpy, grumpy...

After a moment, I blurt, "I...didn't know you had a girlfriend. You should let her know that we're just partners for class and, uh...*friends?"*

Sawyer instantly snaps his attention toward me, his eyes growing serious.

"Friends-ish." I clarify sheepishly, "Mostly partners for class, but still. I don't want to cause any trouble, y'know? I'd feel horrible if you broke up over a misunderstanding. I've seen it happen, and it is not—"

"I don't have a girlfriend."

I stop, gazing up at him in wonder while he slings his bag onto his shoulder. Immediately, his expression blanks, like he was never tense at all.

My confusion only worsens at his reaction, "Oh-Then...who's Larissa?"

"Not my girlfriend."

"Ex?"

"Not my ex." He frowns, "She's a wacky woman who won't leave me alone."

"Wacky? Is she tacky, too?"

His eyes narrow, unimpressed, and I unintentionally snort, "Just saying, you can't be wacky and tacky, gotta pick a struggle—"

"Stop talking."

"I'm joshin'!! I'll be serious!!" I giggle, nudging him, "So...if she isn't any of those, then—"

"She's no one." Running a hand through his hair, he states, "Whatever you were told, was a lie. Larissa and I never had or have anything going on."

Walking around me, he heads for the exit, but before stepping out, he stops to look over his shoulder. He nods from me to the door, and I quickly walk over.

I stand beside him, "So...no girlfriend?"

"No."

"Okay!! As long as I don't upset anyone!!"

"Great."

We walk side by side into the busy halls, and I nod to myself. And while everything's going well at first, it's not long before I start stumbling a bit due to being in such a crowded space. I bump into Sawyer's side, tripping over my laces.

My darn shoes are untied...
Geez...

I fall forward, but Sawyer grabs my arm, catching me. I yelp, jerking forward briefly before he carefully steadies me on my feet.

We stop walking, I smile up at him sheepishly, "Oops." I look down at my feet, seeing my white laces are now dusty, "It appears my shoes are being mean to me again."

"Clearly." Sawyer says pointedly, looking at my shoes, "You can't tie your shoes for shit, hm?"

"What-No, I can!! But there's no guarantee they'll stay that way!!" I pout, "Shoelaces have a mind of their own!!"

They work with you one minute and tell you to kick rocks and eat dirt the next.

Cruel, I tell ya, cruel.

Rolling his eyes, he grumbles, "You're hopeless."

Unexpectedly, his hand slides down to mine, and our palms meet. I stiffen when he intertwines our fingers and pulls me to walk. I stumble behind as he tugs me to stay close, gripping my hand. We enter an empty classroom away from the crowds, and he lets go of my hand to kneel in front of me.

I pause as he grabs my leg and starts tying my shoes. I blink in awe, speechless to say the least. I watch, unsure of what to make of this once he finishes.

"Is that too tight?" He asks, looking up at me. "Um...no." I reply quietly, "Not at all."

Gosh, there's a dance party in my stomach...

He nods, understandingly, grunting as he stands up, and dusts himself off. Looking down at me, he asks, "Ready?"

Sawyer's been attractive, but when he did that, oddly enough he was **more** attractive? I don't know how to describe it.

Probably best not to think that, though.

I nod, and we soon exit the classroom and resume strolling down the hallway side by side. My shoes don't come undone, and I look

down at them as my laces bounce with every step.

Before I can help it, I blurt, "You're good at tying shoes." I smile, "I give props!!"

Yeah, sure, let's talk about shoes.
What a way to change the subject-

"For tying shoes?" He drawls.

"Yep!! You tied them super-duper good!! I owe ya!!"

"You don't owe me, it was nothing, and again, 'super-duper' isn't a thing. It's never going to be."

"It's not a thing to you!! Only cool people say it!!" I lightly poke his shoulder, "And I am super-duper cool!!"

"Or you're just a super-duper idiot..."

"**YOU SAID SUPER-DUPER**."

He stops, his lips squeezing shut. I smirk smugly, and he glares, "**You're a goddamn pain in the ass**."

I laugh, grabbing his arm, "You don't mean that."

"I do."

"Nah-uh."

"Yuh-huh."

"Nah-uh."

"Yuh—"He stops mid-sentence, closing his eyes, and I snicker. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he exhales, "Super-duper isn't a word. End of story—"

"Sounds like someone's hatin' **SUPER-DUPER** hard right now."

Next-Day...

Yawning, I step out of the bathroom stall, girls filing in and out while talking amongst themselves. I approach a sink and set my backpack down.

Getting ready to wash my hands, I freeze when two girls stop to wave, "Bye, Marianne!!"

I smile, waving back as they walk out, "Bye Emmy and Jess!! See you tomorrow!!"

They leave as more girls come in, laughing and talking. I wash my hands, quietly humming to myself; the same song that's been playing in my head.

Le Piccadilly by Erik Satie.

A piano piece I was playing during practice with Francis the last night. It's a pretty melody, but it's very slowly driving me crazy.

After fluffing my mane of curls and making sure my edges were secure, I grab my bag, sling it over my shoulder, and exit the restroom. Entering the hall, I glance at my watch to check the time.

Six minutes 'til class starts, good...
We're on schedule.

This class period Sawyer and I don't have together, so I'm on my own. Thankfully, I have the school memorized. Not really, but enough to find my class.

I hope.

Once I've maneuvered the crowds and get downstairs, I head down the hall near the library when someone shouts-

"**Marianne Parker**."

I freeze, and some people stop briefly to look too, but quickly resume. Turning around, I look to find three girls steadily approaching.

One's tall, black-haired, one's average height, blonde, and the last

one is also average height, red-headed.

I look between them curiously when they stop in front of me. There's a pause following that, very quiet, and the only sound being people disappearing from the hall.

Interesting...

"Oh..." I grip my bag strap, "Yes?"

"That's you, right?" The blonde girl asks, tilting her head, "Marianne?"

"It is." I look between them curiously, "Can I...help you?"

They don't reply right away, exchanging ominous looks with one another before looking at me again. There's an air of tension in the air once they set their gaze on me, not to mention judgment. Obvious judgment.

Awkward.

Under this attention, I start feeling uneasy, my grip on my bag tightening, and my stomach starting to turn.

Despite the feeling, however, I manage a smile, "As nice as this is, I really have to go." I wave, turning to walk away, "See ya—"

I stop when I see a girl standing behind me. She's somewhat tall. Only a few inches taller than I am. And she's super pretty with long, feathered brown hair, blue eyes, and beautifully done makeup.

Our eyes meet, and I still, not expecting to see her. I blink, and instantly, her expression changes. Giving me a onceover, she walks around me, and I awkwardly watch as she joins the three other girls.

Confused, I ask, "H-Hello?"

*"So **you're** Marianne..."* The girl murmurs, hands on her hips, *"Hm...I expected more. Pfft, you're nothing to worry about..."*

My brows furrow, "Excuse me?"

"How do you know him, huh?"

"Know...who?"

"**Sawyer Cortez**? How do you know him?"

"**Class?**" I reply stiffly, and she nods.

She then proceeds to whisper things to the other girls, which only makes things more confusing and worse for me. After a moment, I ask, "I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name."

Humming, she gives me another onceover, "**Larissa.**"

Larissa? Why do I know that name-

My eyes widen.

The girl my classmate and Sawyer were telling me about yesterday. Sawyer's not girlfriend/ex.

"You've probably heard of me, but that's besides the point." Flipping her hair, she states, "I came to meet the new girl everyone's been talking about, AKA you." Expression growing cold, she grits, "Apparently, you've gotten all buddy-buddy with Sawyer, including his friends. And I wanted to ask you about it."

I raise a brow, *"Well...we're just partners for class, so..."*

"That's not what I've heard, but either way--" She leans, saying lowly, "Between you and me, I wouldn't associate with him anymore. He's no good."

I freeze as she continues, "Someone as *fragile* as you couldn't possibly know what to do with a guy like him. Especially with how big of an asshole he is, and his terrible rep? Poor, poor girl. I'm sure you'd like a break, wouldn't you? So, I'd leave him alone and let someone who actually knows how to handle him, handle him, okay?"

I blink, and Larissa's friends nod along as Larissa adds, "I'm only trying to offer you an out when it comes to getting involved with someone like him."

Poking me harshly in the chest, she sternly adds as I quietly wince, "You're not equipped. Never will be." Condescending, she whispers, "Better to stay in your place."

With that said, Larissa plasters on a grin before patting my shoulder roughly, "Sound good?"

I stiffen when they gaze at me expectantly, eyes tense and a bit sharp, like razors. I swallow at that, feeling small under their stares and a heavy chest. Before I can stop it, memories of my old school come flooding in, making my feelings worse.

The stares, the gossip, the comments...
I thought I was past it...

Despite the uneasiness settling from all this and my mind replaying the bad days, I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding, "Was that it?"

Larissa and the girls with her stop, their expressions changing. Neither one of them says a word, and I continue, "All you wanted was to warn me about Sawyer?"

Regardless of the painful reminders of before...

I can't **not** say anything.

That was a mistake I made last time...

"Thanks, but I'll pass. I'd rather make my own conclusions about him, and whether or not I'm 'equipped' to, is up to me to decide. Not someone else. So I'd appreciate it if you didn't."

Larissa's face morphs into one of malice and distaste, as I stand taller, "And, for the record..." I look between them firmly, "You're very passive-aggressive and not nice, so...yeah."

Ooo, wow, really showed them...

They all exchange baffled looks, and much to my relief, the bell signaling class is about to start rings. All the tension in my shoulders releases at the sound, and I announce, "And on that note, you all have a lovely afternoon."

Whipping around, I speedily head down the empty hall and turn a corner. I don't turn back, my heart racing slightly and my mind running with thoughts. Mostly those girls and what they said.

I try to let it go despite the persistent feeling.

Maybe I won't run into them again...
I hope...

10: The Road Not Taken

[image] [image] [image] [image] [image]

MARIANNE

"**I thought he** was, like, super-hot." Erica whines, leaning against the locker beside mine, "And his accent, ughhh—" She brings a hand to her chest, "Gets me every time..."

"**Whore**." Cecilia teases. Trading out textbooks, I shrug, "To be fair, Cil, accents are hard to turn down."

Chewing gum, Erica agrees, "Exactly. If Henry Cavill came up to you, would you say no?"

"Pfft, 'course not." Cecilia scoffs, and I laugh.

My classmates, Erica and Cecilia, and I are standing at my locker, chatting. School ended just a few minutes ago, and the halls are busy as usual.

Erica's talking about a crappy guy she met online, and Cecilia is telling her, 'I told you so'.

"Fair enough." Cecilia sighs, "But still, I told you so, Erica."

They bicker while I grab my lunch box and close my locker. Shrugging my bag onto my shoulder, I turn to Erica when she asks, "You're meeting Daisy and Skip by the auditorium, right?"

"Yep!" I nod.

"Okay, girly!" Cecilia grins, "We'll see you tomorrow—"

She stops, her attention drifting to something behind me. Her lips snap shut, and soon Erica looks too. She falls still, her eyes widening too.

I raise a brow, "Something wrong?"

"Um..." Cecilia stammers, "No, it's just...uh—"

"We have a visitor." Erica chimes in, "A ***surprising*** one."

They urge me to look, and I peek over my shoulder. As soon as I do, I see a dark hoodie and a familiar dogtag necklace. Gradually, my eyes drag upward, and he and I look at one another.

"Sawyer." I announce.

He's sporting his usual dull expression, dressed in an all-grey outfit. His hands are in his pockets, and there's an earbud in his ear, and the other tucked into the neckline of his hoodie.

Turning to Erica and Cecilia, I chirp, "You're right! That is surprising!"

"Yeah..." Cecilia agrees stiffly, "You know him?"

"Yep!! We're partners for class!!"

Erica and Cecilia gawk at me like I admitted something wrong, and I turn to face Sawyer again, "Hey!"

He doesn't say it back, and I frown, "You gonna say it?"

"I'm not."

I pout, and he gives me an unimpressed look. I continue frowning, and after a moment, he sighs, taking his earbud out, *"Fine...**Hey**."*

"Finally!!" I clap, "Now was that so hard?"

"Gut-wrenching."

"Hey, Mari." Erica announces, "We're...gonna go."

"Oh, okay." I reply, as she and Cecilia shoot wary glances at Sawyer, "See you guys later!!"

I wave as they take off down the opposite end of the noisy hall. They exchange a look, laughing while glancing over their shoulders once more. When they're lost in the crowds, my brows furrow.

"That was abrupt." I mumble, "Wonder why..."

Wait-

"I forget you're, like, a micro-celebrity." I tell Sawyer, and his brows furrow.

"Micro-celebrity?" He echoes, "Definitely not."

"Is too."

"Whatever. You're meeting Daisy and Skipper?"

"Yes."

"I'll walk you."

Pausing, I stammer, "Oh, uh...yeah, okay."

We head down the hallway side by side, and I sneak a glance at him. This week so far has been the usual. Work, piano practice, school, homework, and repeat.

Plus, Sawyer and I have been walking to our classes together, so that's been nice. However, he's never walked with me at the end of the day.

I soften.

He'll deny it, no doubt, but regardless, it's always funny catching Sawyer being nice.

"What's with the goofy grin?" Sawyer narrows his eyes.

*"**Nothingggg**..."* I coo.

He frowns, and I try to hide that I'm obviously lying. Inching closer, I nudge him, "It's awful nice of you to walk me."

"It's not a big deal. Don't make it into one."

We pass through the cafeteria crowds and eventually find the auditorium. Standing outside the double doors, I find Daisy and

Skipper waiting while they chat.

"Thank you!" I smile, "See you tomorrow?"

He doesn't say it back, not that I expect him to, and I pat his arm. I turn to leave, but stumble when my bag jerks, "**Agh**—"

Looking over my shoulder, I find Sawyer holding my backpack. I blink, "...yes?"

Letting go, he clears his throat, "There was...something I wanted to say before you go."

"Sure, what's up?"

Tugging at his collar, he starts to speak, but I blab, "Wait-is it my shoes? Are they untied again?" I look at my feet, "Gosh, it's a wonder I haven't faceplanted—"

"No, they're not." Sawyer says dryly, "For once."

"Phew-okay, good. Sorry, back to you."

He doesn't say anything right away, his eyes shifting between mine intensely. Within his gaze, there's a sense of uncertainty—something I've never seen from him.

Feeling small under all this attention, I wait for what he may say, despite my nerves.

After a moment, he blurts, "You busy after school tomorrow?"

I deflate.

Am I busy?

"I don't have work...nor practice, so," I tap my chin, "No. Don't think so."

"Okay. For Literature...y'know, we have that project due Monday," He looks everywhere but at me, "And I thought...we could meet after school to finish it tomorrow."

My eyes widen as he adds, "If...you want."

Staring at him like he's sprouted a second head, I don't say anything right away. Jaw clenched, Sawyer spares me a glance. And while it wasn't long, there's a sheepishness about it. Almost shy.

"Shy" and "Sawyer" in the same sentence is wild.

"If not, I get it." He scratches his head, "It's not like we're behind, so...don't worry about it if you don't—"

"I'd like that."

He stops, his shoulders relaxing, and I smile, "Good idea!!"

Sawyer stares; this look on his face is dazed or surprised. His eyes rock between mine before dropping, "Oh..." He reaches into his pocket, "In that case—"

He holds his phone out, "Put your number in. I'll...text you."

Cheeks warm, I take his phone and type in my number. I hand it back to him, "Looking forward to it."

Staring at his phone for a moment, he slips it into his pocket, gives me a nod, and walks away. He heads back down the hall, disappearing into the crowds, and once he's gone, I bite my lip.

After school tomorrow...just him and me...

A tiny grin slips across my face, and I skip to the back double doors to meet Daisy and Skipper.

We're just finishing a project, but...
It doesn't make it any less...exciting.

Daisy stares at me like I'm speaking another language, and I raise a brow, "What?"

"Do you hear what you're saying?" She gestures to the busy building and sidewalk in front of us, "Sawyer's meeting you here because he asked you to, and you're not surprised?"

"I am."

She narrows her eyes, and I correct myself, "I was. But...we already talked about this, didn't we?"

"Yes, but it doesn't make it any less shocking." She eyes the parking lot, "It was weird enough when you said you were partners, now this? And to think, this all happened after we warned you not to get involved with him..."

"But you also said you'd give him a chance, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah."

It's officially the next day, and school ended about an hour ago. Sawyer did text me last night and we agreed to meet at this place called "The Lounge."

I told Skipper and Daisy, and they were speechless.

They asked every question under the sun, and I answered them all to the best of my ability. I may have tried to change the subject a few times, which only worked for a few minutes.

And while I was planning to take the bus to meet Sawyer, Daisy offered to give me a ride before she heads to babysit.

Skipper had to be at work by 3:45, so she couldn't come.

"You don't have to wait 'til Sawyer gets here." I remind Daisy, "I said I'd be fine to wait by myself—"

"And leave you alone? No. Weirdos exist, Mari." She snorts, "Plus, I wanna see this play out."

My phone vibrates, and I perk up. Checking it, I find a text from Sawyer:

SAWYER
Not far.

I start texting back when Daisy suddenly leans over until her head

bumps mine. Her long hair falls into my screen, and I stop, glancing over to find that she's staring at the messages.

Nosy.

A granola bar hangs from her mouth, "That him?"

"It is." I move my head from hers, "He's close."

"And what time did he say to meet?"

"4:30."

She checks her watch, "It's 4:32. He's late."

I roll my eyes when suddenly a black mustang pulls up in the empty parking spot beside us.

I look out the window, and Daisy leans over to look too. The windows are a little tinted, so I can't see anything besides a silhouette of their hair and clothes.

However, there's only one person I know with moppy hair like that.

Sawyer steps out the car, wearing his usual unzipped hoodie, but with dark jeans instead of sweats.

I didn't know he owned jeans...

Rolling down my window, I sing, "Hey!" Seeing me, Sawyer closes his door, and I wave, "You made it!"

"Late." Daisy chimes in, "By two—" She checks her watch, "three minutes."

"Ignore her."

"Right." Settling his attention on me, Sawyer asks, "Ready?"

"Yep!" I hop out of Daisy's car. I close the door but lean into the passenger window to wave.

"Love you, Mari!" Daisy blows kisses.

"Love you more!"

Once she backs out of her parking spot and drives away, I look at the building. I admire the simplicity of the sign and the plant décor hanging on the windows.

We head towards the double doors, Sawyer walking in front of me. Grabbing the door handle, he steps aside and opens it for me.

"Oh-Thank you." I enter the lounge first.

He follows, "Yep."

The door shuts behind us, and I detail the scenery. It smells like coffee and baked goods, which is only fitting for a café. There are lots of people sitting around at the circle ore window tables with chairs and couches.

They're either on computers, reading books, writing, and/or chit-chatting with someone.

It's bigger inside than it appears.

"Cozy." I comment, "You come here a lot?"

"Not really." He guides me through the lounge.

We find a booth tucked off in a corner next to a magazine stand. I sit, tucking my floral dress under me, and Sawyer sits across from me. He pulls out his binder and computer from his bag, and I do the same.

Setting my laptop on the table, I see Sawyer open his, and-

I gasp, "No stickers?" He stops, "What?"

"Your computer, it's...***naked.***"

"No, it's not."

Opening my binder, I grab a sleeping bear sticker and slide it across the table to him. Looking at it, he gives me a disapproving glance,

and I urge him to take it.

Sliding the sticker back, he states, "I don't want it."

I slide it to him, "I insist. I'll even put it on for you!"

"Not happening."

We push the sticker back and forth a few times. For how long beats me, but each time Sawyer grows more agitated.

"I don't want it."

"Just keep it, dude." I shove it back, "I don't take back gifts."

Groaning, he reluctantly takes it, "You're such a pain in the ass. And stop calling me dude."

"No promises."

We begin working on our project, exchanging notes, and talking about it. writing a literary analysis about a poem of our choosing. There were several options, but we chose "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost.

It was easy to decide since we liked that one most.

I write a few things in my notebook, and he does too as we talk about the poem and assignment.

And y'know, for someone so grumpy and "unapproachable," Sawyer's easy to work with. He's honestly one of the best partners I've ever had.

Glancing at him from around my computer, I see him typing away while looking at his notes. He writes something down, twirling his pen between his fingers as he reads. Curiosity creeps in, but I don't voice it and space out momentarily.

"What?" Sawyer asks, and I freeze.

"Huh?"

His eyes flit to mine above his laptop, "You're staring."

"Sorry...I was just...thinking." I doodle in my notebook, "We're good partners, and...we should know more about one another. Like...basic stuff!!"

Finishing writing, he squeezes his lips together, "We know enough." He flips a page in his notebook, and I huff, "Oh, come on! I don't even know your favorite color...if there is one."

"Is that all?"

"And maybe...a few other things?"

Leaning back in his seat, Sawyer twirls his pen, searching my expression. I await his response, and he bites his bottom lip briefly.

Holding up three fingers, he says, "Three questions."

"Oh-Really?" I bring my hands together, "Yay! Okay, first one: what's your favorite color? And no, you can't say black or grey."

"Well, fuck," He props his chin in his palm, "there's my answer." I scrunch my nose, "C'mon, you have to pick another one!! What's your next favorite?"

"Purple."

My eyes widen and I smile a little, "Good choice! Mine's blue!!" Thinking, I play with my bracelet charms, "Favorite past time?"

"Reading."

"Favorite show?"

"Don't have one."

"Middle name?"

"That's more than three."

I purse my lips. "Please? Just, like, two more?" Sucking his teeth, he gives in, "Fine, I don't have a middle name."

"Okay...biggest pet peeve?"

"**This**." He motions between us, and I snort.

"Thank you!" I wave at the cashier while grabbing my mocha frappe.

"You're welcome!! Have a wonderful day!" She waves as Sawyer and I head to the exit of the lounge.

Sawyer holds the door open, and I walk out as he trails behind me. We head down the sidewalk side by side, and Sawyer switches us around so he's walking on the outside of the sidewalk.

His bag lazily hangs over his shoulder, his hands in his pockets, and his attention fixed on what's in front of us. My bag is over my shoulder, and my kinky curls bounce with my steps as I stay close to his side.

"Okay, you have two more questions!" I skip a little, "Was there anything else?"

Humming, he scratches his jaw, "Mmmm...middle name, I guess. If you have one."

"Adeline. My Grandmother's name."

We finished our assignment 40-ish ago and decided to go for a walk to stretch our legs. Much to my surprise, Sawyer decided to ask me some questions too! Because I asked him five questions (even though it was supposed to be three), he's asked four so far!

My middle name, hobbies, favorite snacks, and my sticker "infested" computer—

His words, not mine.

"Okay...how long have you been playing piano?" Sawyer asks as we stop at a crosswalk. "Since I was six." I confess, "My Dad taught me."

We cross the street when it's our turn, and as we're about to pass a tattoo store, I notice something on Sawyer's back.

"Hey, wait." I grab his arm, and he stops, "You've got a...***thing*** on you."

He tilts his head, "A thing?"

"Yes." I set my frappe on the concrete windowsill, "Hold still."

Standing on my tiptoes, I scoop up whatever is on his shoulder. My eyes light up, "Oo!! Sawyer, lookie!!" I hold it up, and he looks between me and it a few times.

Blinking, he deadpans, "A bug?"

"A ladybug! They're good luck!!"

Stepping closer, Sawyer's shoulder bumps mine as we watch my new friend crawl around in my palms. Sliding his hands into his pockets, he mutters, "You believe that?"

Scoffing, I retort, "Uh, duh!" Beside us, I let the ladybug crawl into the potted plants by the store windows, "Everyone likes luck!!"

Humming, he watches the ladybug crawl away, "Right, well, instead of collecting bugs, we should get going, yeah?"

"Ladybugs, but I suppose."

Handing me my drink, he and I resume walking. And as we go, we find ourselves talking about any and everything. Sawyer isn't talking a whole lot, but it's enough to say it's more than the usual.

We arrive at a store, and I convince Sawyer to go in.

"Five minutes, that's it." He looks around like it hurts to be here.

The first place I go to is clothing, and Sawyer's right beside me. I surf through them, showing Sawyer the cute tops I find.

To each one, he gives a bland comment:

"Wow." "You like that?" "Sure."

Finding a banana hat, I turn to Sawyer, stand on my tiptoes, and

place it on his head. He stiffens, and I pretend to take a picture, ***"Superstar."***

The most exasperated expression spills into his features, and I crack up. My head meets his chest, and he complains, "You're ridiculous."

"You're wearing a banana hat." I point, and his expression hardens. Laughing harder, I bury my face into his chest again, "Don't make that face..."

"It's not funny."

"You're right, it's hilarious."

Sitting up, I grab a pickle hat and slide it onto my head, "Bam! Now we're both ridiculous!"

I strike a pose, and Sawyer gives me a onceover before reaching up and pulling the hat over my face.

I stumble, "Hey—"

"You're an idiot."

Pulling the hat up, I pout, "Am not." He pulls it m over my face again, and I whine.

We explore the hats a little longer, and I make my way to the furniture side of the store. The more we explore, the more I'm positive we've been here longer than five minutes.

We visit a few more places around the store, and I eventually check out a cute blouse and earrings. Walking out, we decide to make another lap around the block. Time seems to fly as we continue chit-chatting and stopping by various shops.

And when I see the sun setting for the day, I grab Sawyer's arm and motion to a bench. We sit side by side, watching the sky turn pink, blue, and purple. Sawyer and I sit in silence for a while; people walk past us and cars drive down the busy streets.

I don't know how long we sit there for, but by the time streetlights

come on and the sky has turned dark, Sawyer and I head back to the lounge.

"What color do you think Monday is?" I ask as we approach the building.

"You're so damn weird..." He remarks, and I giggle.

"Just answer."

"Hell if I know...green maybe?"

"Oo, good choice."

Suddenly, my phone rings, and I pull it from my bag. Finding Daisy calling, I smile and answer, "Hey, Daisy! I was about to call you!"

"Surprise, I called first!" She laughs, "I was just asking if you were ready."

"Just about!"

"Okay...this is terrible timing, but I can't get you."

"Oh." I deflate, "You can't?"

"No. The kids I'm babysitting their mom is stuck at work longer than expected and has no one else to watch them until she's off." She explains somberly, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Things happen."

"I know Cass is working late, so I'll call my mom or sister."

"Oh, no, it's okay." I tell her, "Hate to be a burden! I'll just...take the bus and—"

"Bus?" Sawyer butts in, and I look at him. "Uh..." I stammer, "Yes...?"

He grimaces, "No."

"No?"

Taking my hand, Sawyer tugs me to walk, and I stumble when he states, "I'll drive you."

My cheeks flush, "What? Wait—"

He pulls me closer to him and out of the way of a crowd of people that pass. Blinking up at him, I find he's staring straight ahead.

I'm right beside him, and...

He's always been effortlessly attractive, but up close, it's more obvious. A dance party erupts in my stomach, and I timidly turn my attention to our hands. His palm feels rough against mine, callused, but comfortable.

Warm...

"Marianne? Hello? Can you hear me?" Daisy asks, concern in her voice, "Did you say bus? I hope not."

"Yeah, I did, but—" I pull on Sawyer's fingers, "Sawyer, I couldn't ask you—"

"You didn't, I said I was."

We head to the parking lot and his car. Opening the passenger door, he steps aside and lets my hand go, "Tell her you have a ride."

I give him a look, phone pressed to my ear, and he stares at me in complete seriousness. Motioning to the car, he says, "Well?"

Flustered, I manage to tell Daisy, "I...I have a ride."

Daisy's silent before saying, "You do? Oh, great!! Who?"

I shake my head, hopping into Sawyer's car, "Sawyer. He's offered...'kay, love you, bye."

"Wait, Sawyer what—"

I hang up on her mid-screech and put my phone into my bag. Sawyer closes my door before walking over to the driver's side.

Once he's in the car and starts it, I buckle up, drowning in this silence falling between us.

It's different...

"What's your address?" He asks, pulling me from thought. I tell him, and he reverses before taking off down the street.

Arriving in front of my house, Sawyer parks, and I stare out the window at my porch. The lights are on, making it well-lit in my dark street.

"Thank you again." I tell Sawyer and he nods. "Don't mention it." He states.

"You sure there isn't any way I can pay you back?" I open my bag and pull-out money, "I have five dollars—"

"No, I told you already." He stops me, "I offered, and it wasn't a long drive." I grip my five-dollar bill, "But...I feel like I should repay you somehow."

"You don't. Seriously."

I purse my lips, trying to think of what to give him. A thought crosses my mind, and I open my bag again. Sawyer watches, confusion written on his face as I dig through my stuff.

After a few seconds, I find what I'm looking for and hold it out to him. He stares at the purple dinosaur holding a book pin in my hands, and his brows furrow. Silence ensues, the only sound being his radio playing quietly as we sit for what feels like forever.

Holding it out to him, I shake it, and he asks, bewildered, "...what is it?"

"A pin of gratitude. My way of thanking you since you won't take money."

"We talked about this."

"I know, but please?"

Finally, after a few moments of hesitation, he takes it. Content, I rest my hands on my lap, "I want you to have it! Also, it reminds me of you!"

Staring at it in his palm, he murmurs, "How so?"

"He's reading a book! Like you!"

Sawyer looks at me instantly as I shrug a little, "You like reading, so...I figured why not give you something similar to what you like?"

There's a shift in his demeanor, though subtle. His expression softens just a bit, and his cheeks turn the lightest shade of pink. Even under this dim-lighting of the outside street lights, I can see it.

It's rare, and...
I wouldn't mind seeing it more...

"You like it?" I fiddle with my rings.

His eyes rock between mine, lighter than how they usually are. But he looks away before I can see it clearly, *"It's...this is the dumbest thing I've ever gotten..."*

He wraps his hand around the pin tightly and slides it into his pocket. I smirk, "Is it?"

"Definitely."

"I bet."

11: Hate To Be That Guy

[image] [image] [image]

⚠***TW: Violence/Abuse***⚠

SAWYER

It's nothing special. Seriously.

I stare at the dinosaur pin in my hands, running my thumb over it a few times. Tracing the book in its hands, I scoff. It's stupid. Completely and just utterly-

Sighing, I lean back in my swivel chair, setting it on my desk. I prop it against my stacked books, seemingly unable to stop staring at it. Biting my lip, I find myself thinking about her, and my jaw tightens.

"It reminds me of you!"
"You like reading, so I figured why not give you something similar to what you like?"

How annoying...

I dropped Marianne off about 30-40 minutes ago. Walked her to her door, told her goodnight, and drove home. And while I was planning to sleep since I have work early tomorrow-

I lean back in my chair, sliding my hands behind my head.

I've done nothing except think about today.

Everything. It's embarrassing. I can't believe half the shit I did today. I wore a banana hat, got a sticker, answered stupid questions, and got a "pin of gratitude" as a thank you. Hell, I even sat down and watched a sunset. All things I'd never do, but did.

Because of a ***girl***.

An annoyingly...pretty girl...

"Dude."

Whipping around, I hurriedly flip the pin over so it's face down. Peering into my room, Donovan stares at me and I stare back, jaw tight.

"What?" I give him a onceover. "So?" He drawls. I raise a brow, "So...?"

"Your date with Marianne?" He smirks, and I grimace, "How was it?"

"**Get out**."

I turn back to my desk, and he comes into the room, "Oh, c'mon, your bestest, favoritest pal knows you wanna talk about it! So, spill!"

"Fuckoff." I gripe, putting the pin in my pocket.

Jumping into my bed, he sprawls out, and I give him a look. His car keys slide out of his pocket and hit the floor, but he doesn't rush to get them, "How'd it go? I know dates are exciting!"

"It wasn't a damn date." Spinning around in my chair, I frown at him, "And shouldn't you be going home?"

"Pfft, please, I leave when I want!" He checks his watch, *"Which will be soon, Ma's asking about her car..."*

I roll my eyes, and he whines, "But that doesn't matter! C'mon, tell me! How was it?"

I cross my arms, "We finished our project."

"And?"

"The end."

He gives me a disapproving look, and I return it. Sitting up, he huffs, "Really? No goodnight smooch?"

I glare and he bites back a smile. "Kidding!!" He raises his hands

defensively, "Totally kidding! You're not that bold I know..."

I jerk my head at the comment, and he continues, "But all jokes aside, it's not like you to study with someone. Let alone, meet them outside of school."

I turn back to my desk, "First-and-last-time thing."

"Right, of course, will never happen again."

Sitting upright, he grunts and runs a hand through his kinky fro, he mutters, "But at least tell me this—" I raise a brow and he asks, curious, "Did you enjoy it?"

I sit in thought, deciding if I want to come clean and tell the truth. It'd be the sappiest shit I'd ever admit. Especially to Donovan. He'd tell the guys and they'd make fun of me, no doubt, but honestly...

"I did." I confess, reminiscent, "I enjoyed it."

The day overall...was good. I liked...being with her...
Gross...so gross...

I glance over my shoulder at Donovan and find him with a big, stupid grin on his face. "You enjoyed it, huh?" He wiggles his brows, and I scowl, "Bet you did—"

"**Leave**." I point at the door.

Monday

Sheets of rain hit the roof and paint the windows outside, and I silently curse. I lay my head on the table, my face meeting the cold wood when I close my eyes.

I didn't sleep last night.

I haven't had problems sleeping for a week, which is very surprising for me. For the past week, I got a solid six-ish hours every night. I thought the trend would continue, but last night I hardly slept a wink.

Damnit...

Plus, it's raining. I hate rain.

Chewing cereal loudly beside me, Peanut's foot repeatedly kicks my shin under the table, "Um...Sawyer, you okay?"

"Mrrrr..." I manage, her foot still ramming into my leg.

"Yes?" She asks, "Does 'mrrr' mean yes?"

I don't reply when footsteps enter the kitchen, and he announces, "Good morning, crew! How's every-***woah***."

I lift my head just enough to find my uncle, Alejandro, standing in the kitchen. He's got a hand on his chest and his brown eyes set on me. There's deep concern written in his expression, and I lay my head back down.

"Good morning, Alejandro!" Peanut sings, and her foot finally stops kicking me, "Sawyer didn't sleep again!"

"I think you're right, Pea." He replies.

Alejandro Cortez is my uncle and my dad's older brother. He lives alone on a farm, is a nurse, and he and I are close. I, Evan, and Peanut lived with him for a few years before we moved in with Dad.

That was a little less than a year ago.

He didn't have work today and came over to check on us since Dad's gone for a week and Evan left out earlier this morning.

"No sleep again, Sawyer?" Alejandro asks, and I grunt, "I thought it was getting better."

I jinxed it...

"How come you don't sleep sometimes, Sawyer?" Peanut asks, and I lift my head. She curiously tilts her head at me, shoveling more cereal into her mouth.

Leaning back in my chair, I shrug, "I just don't"

"Does it go away?"

*"... **eh** ."*

Nodding, Peanut looks from me to her half-empty cup of orange juice. After a moment, she takes the cup and pushes it towards me.

I raise a brow, and she softly says, "Here ya go!! I'll share my juice!! Maybe it'll help!!"

Alejandro cracks a small smile, and I awkwardly grab the cup, "Oh...thanks, Peanut."

"You're welcome!!" She sings, her long hair bobbing. She hops out of her chair and dusts herself off when Alejandro announces, "Go get your backpack and stuff, Pea, I'll take you to school."

"Okay!!" She smiles, running past him.

He ruffles her hair as she goes, and she laughs, before skipping upstairs. Once she's gone, I slump into my chair, "You don't have to do that, Alejandro."

"I know. I wanted to." He turns to me, "Plus, I wanted to help you out this morning since you drive her every day."

I shoot him a nod, "Thanks..."

"No problem."

Crossing his arms, Alejandro leans against the kitchen wall, staring at me. I stare back, unsettled by the sudden intensity within his expression. I blink at him, and he blinks back, his eyes subtly narrowing.

"Um..." I bring the cup of orange juice to my lips, "Yes?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head, "Just...thinking."

"Right..." I set the cup down, "About what?" Humming, he asks,

"You're not having those nightmares about ***her*** again...are you?"

"Oh-no. Definitely not."

"Good. I'm just checking." Thoughtfully, he says, "It was rough there for a while."

"Yeah..." I agree, "It was."

I used to have nightmares all the time. Every night I couldn't sleep, and that paired with the insomnia I had was horrific. When we moved in with Alejandro, they got worse for a while.

Thankfully though, I haven't had them in almost a year.

"Glad to see you improving." He smiles, "Evan's told me you've been getting better."

"He did?" I raise a brow. "Yep. And you know what," He puts his hands on his hips, "I think he's right."

"Yeah, I don't see it." I rub my face, "It sure doesn't feel like it either..."

He chuckles, "Of course you'd say that. Evan said you'd say that too." I scoff, "I'm not that predictable..."

"Wellll..."

I frown, and he cracks a smirk, "I'm kidding, mijo."

Rolling my eyes, I grumble, "**Whatever**."

He laughs again, his shoulders shaking slightly. After a moment, he glances upstairs, before thoughtfully asking, "Have you talked to your dad about...y'know?"

I pause, squeezing my lips into a line. Looking at me out of his peripheral, he awaits my reply, and I remain silent. We stare at one another for a long moment, and Alejandro turns to me, serious, "So no?"

Looking down at the cup of orange juice, I dryly mutter, *"I haven't gotten around to it..."*

"**Sawyer—**"

"I know, I know, but...Dad and I...are in a good place right now. The last thing I want is to ruin that."

"You're not ruining anything by telling him how you feel. Especially after everything that's happened."

Before moving with Dad, he wasn't around which is why we lived with Alejandro. And while my relationship with Dad is fine, we haven't really talked. Nothing about everything.

I glance up at him, and he says firmly, "You're avoiding making things more complicated and keeping the peace. I get it. But...have you had that one-on-one conversation with him about it all?"

"Uh..." I stammer, "No."

Giving me a look, he gazes at me, and I rub my face, "I'll talk to him, okay? Can we...not talk about this right now?"

"Okay." He says softly, "I'll let you...decide when."

"**FOUND IT**."

We look toward the stairs and find Peanut running down them. Panting a little, she holds up her bag, "I couldn't find it!! Turns out it was under my bed!!"

Alejandro snorts, "Oh, good!! I was wondering!!"

Suddenly my phone begins going off like crazy, and I pull it from my pocket. Immediately, I find several texts from Donovan-

DUMB ASS
Yo I'm ready!!
You otw?
Hello?
ASSHOLE I KNOW YOU AREN'T ASLEEP

ANSWER ME
WE'RE GOING TO BE LATE

I check the time, "**Shit.**" Alejandro raises a brow when I jump out of my chair, "**Why didn't you tell me it's 7:45?**"

"Is it?" Alejandro says, pulling back his sleeve to see his watch, "Oh..."

It's still raining. Has been all day.

I frown at the window beside me in this busy hall as droplets roll down it. Silently, I sigh, annoyed.

And while I still hate the rain, it's not so bad anymore.

And it's all because of her.

Marianne grabs my arm, and I instantly look down at her. Smiling, she says, "You were right, my lunchbox was still in the room!"

"Told you." I reply, and she nods, grabbing my arm. I push it closer to her so she has a better grip and begin walking.

"You're all sweaty and gross now!!" She comments, gripping my bicep, "Geez."

"I just left gym." I shrug, "I'm not going to smell like roses."

"Well, sir, I didn't say ***ya stank.*** I'm saying you're super-duper sweaty! You be gyming hard, huh?"

"Gyming?"

"Yeah! It's a thing!!"

"No."

We arrive at my locker, and I pull it open as she waves at a few people walking past, "It is today!!"

Sure it is...

"Oh, I almost forgot! Guess what?"

"What?" I search my locker for my math textbook, and she grabs and tugs at me. I look down at her as she proudly says, "My shoes didn't come untied after you tied them earlier!!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!! But—" She wags a finger at me, "They didn't come untied, sure, but how's that? You got magic fingers or somethin'?"

After Strength and Conditioning, I snuck away from Zachary and Elias and walked towards Marianne's class. Not for any reason, I just found myself heading in her direction.

Right as I was making my way to her classroom, we ran into each other. And when I say, 'ran into', I mean literally ran into. Not very observant, this girl.

Not only that, right before lunch, her shoe was untied, so I tied them-

Don't give me that look.

I only did it because...yeah...

"No. I just know how to tie shoes." I deadpan, "And you don't."

"Hey!! True!! But mean!!" She pouts.

I shoot her a look, not saying anything as I continue stuffing books into my bag. Closing my locker, I slide my backpack onto my shoulder, "It's called honesty."

"Whatever. So, we're stopping by my locker?"

"Yeah."

We begin walking down the hall, and she hums as per usual, bobbing her head along with the tune.

"Wanna know a random fact?" She suddenly asks, and I raise a

brow. I frown, and she purses her lips, staring at me with those doe eyes.

Goddamnit-

"What?" I sigh. "Did you know Scotland chose the Unicorn as their national animal?" She grins, "Isn't that the coolest thing you've ever heard?"

"No."

That is random as hell...

"Of course, you'd say that. You're a grump." She proclaims, "You're like...The Grinch or Squidward or...oh, Oscar the Grouch!!"

"I'm none of those."

"You are!! Except cooler!!"

I huff, hating that I like that she thinks I'm cooler than most. Even if they are fictional characters—***fuck, I hate myself.***

"Know what? Imma start calling you Grumpy from now on." She chirps, "Mr. Grumpy. Or Sir-Grumps-Alot. Grump Master. Grump Meister—"

"Never call me any of those."

"I will!"

We arrive at her locker, and she chortles, a sly look in her eyes, "Every time I see you, I'm gonna say '*What's up, Sir-Grumps-Alot',* or *'What's poppin',' Grump Master'*, or *'Yo, Grump Meister'*—"

"Marianne, if you do that—"

"You'll love it? I know!!"

She giggles at my annoyance, opening her locker and shoving books into her bag. And though I want to frown, I can't. All because she's laughing.

She flashes me that dimply grin I know all too well, and I can't take my eyes off her.

"Anywho!!" She closes her locker and slips her bag on, "Can we please stop by the ladies' room?"

"Yeah, let's go." I reply, and we make our way towards the restrooms. We arrive, and she waves, "I shall return!!"

She pushes open the restroom door and rushes in. The door closes behind her, and I turn my attention elsewhere. My eyes land on the vending machine across the hall, and after careful consideration, I decide to do something I thought I'd never do...

Buy those cookies Marianne likes.

Yes, I got them for her, shut up-

I shove them into my hoodie pocket and lean against the wall next to the vending machine. Tugging my phone from my sweatpants pocket, I open my crossword puzzle app and tune out. People walk past, rushing through the halls, talking to each other, or texting on their phones.

Just as I'm spacing out, I get a weird feeling. Like I'm being watched. I look around the halls briefly, not seeing anyone specifically. After surveying the hall, my shoulders relax.

Maybe it's in my head ...
Maybe I'm being paranoid-

"**Sawyer Cortez**."

Or not.

I turn to my left and find five guys approaching, "Can I help you?"

The guy in the front of the group chuckles, and so do the other guys following him. "You know me." The guy smirks smugly, "Don't you remember? We've met before!"

"Doubt it."

"Jamison? Wilcott? Football team? Linebacker? We had gym together last year? I hangout with Dorian?"

"I don't keep tabs on who hangs out with that asshat." I shrug, "Couldn't care less."

"Wow. You really don't know me? That's crazy—"

"Is it?"

"But I digress. I just wanted to talk to you."

"Okay..." Thinking, I ask, "Why?"

"Cause I know Dorian doesn't like you." He explains matter-of-factly, "Plus, you're known around school as some big, scary asshole. A wrestler. Figured I'd check it out myself."

"Right. Good for you—we done?"

Typically, shit like this would piss me off. But at the same time, I don't even think I care about getting mad.

It's just annoying.

"'Course not!! Someone's impatient!!" He smirks, "There's more I wanna talk about!! Dorian's told me so much!! I have questions!! Like, why don't you and him like each other? Or is it true you'll fight anyone just because? Or!! Are you and that Marianne chick a thing?"

"She isn't some chick." I wave him off, "This isn't a damn Q&A, piss off." I return to my phone, and Jamison scoffs, "So what? You think I'm not worth your time?"

"If the shoe fits."

He laughs in disbelief, looking at his friends, "You know, Dorian was right: You are an asshole."

"Join the club."

"If that's true, I wonder what else is." He says, as if inspecting me, "You don't seem like much of a threat to me."

My jaw tightens and I start feeling even more annoyed. I'd hate to put this guy in his place (not really), but damnit, he's getting on my nerves.

And what does he mean I'm not a ***threat***?

Who said I was?

Turning to him, I grit, "I feel like you came over here to piss me off."

"Why? Is this pissing you off?" Jamison asks, "I didn't think trying to make conversation was a crime."

To that, I turn away, deciding to quit responding.

I'm just waiting for Marianne to get out of the bathroom...
Wish she'd come out sooner...

"Tell me, Sawyer, you and that Marianne girl a thing or what?" Jamison suddenly asks, "Cause if not, I'd love to take her out sometime. She's hot."

I give him a look, and he chuckles, raising his hands innocently, "I'm teasing! But in all seriousness, are you two a thing, or can I step in?"

He's trying to piss me off on purpose...
And I'm not giving him that satisfaction...

I try to relax, but the little shit keeps going-

"Oh, you givin' me the silent treatment now? Just what you'd expect from the school's biggest freak!! Say!! Speaking of freaks!! Whatever happened with your mom? Isn't she, like, in prison or something?"

"What'd you say?" I turn to him.

Why's he talking about that?

Jamison pauses, his eyes searching mine briefly. There's slight hesitation in his demeanor, but he laughs, "Oo, strike a nerve?"

"What did you say?"

His friends all 'Ooo' and 'Ah' as he grins smugly, "You heard me. Your mom. She in prison for all the fucked-up shit she did?" Taking a step closer, he stares me dead in the eye, "Bet she is. And y'know, it'd be a shame if your girlfriend found out."

My knuckles crack when I ball my hands up. Memories play in my mind as I recall everything.

The longest four years of my life. Living with ***her***.

The yelling, the violence, the alcohol, the drugs ...

I try to push the memories away, my chest feeling tight. I bring my hand to my chest, feeling for my necklace under my hoodie. I grip the dog-tag.

I wouldn't want Marianne to see that...

Evan, Alejandro, Dad, Peanut, and everyone would say let it go and let it be. Walk away.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to remain indifferent. But unfortunately for Jamison, he pushes a finger into my chest, slimily saying-

"Y'know? About how your dad ***left*** and how everyone in your family is fucked-up and on dru—"

Grabbing his wrist, I twist it, and he lets out a loud cry. His knees buckle, but I snatch him up by the collar before he falls. I slam him against the wall beside us, and he wheezes; his friends fall silent.

Gasping, Jamison's eyes widen, "What the-fuck—" He squirms, "My wrist—"

"**YOU WANT TO TALK? FINE. LET'S TALK**." I snap.

"**THE HELL'S YOUR PROBLEM?!**" He yells, still trying to wiggle free, "**YOU'RE CRAZY—**"

Getting a better grip on his shirt, I slam him against the wall again, and he grunts, voice hoarse, "Argh—"

"**SHUT THE FUCKUP**."

He stops, staring at me wide-eyed.

"I don't know you, and you don't know me. I don't give a rat's ass if you're Dorian's friend, teammate, bitch—whatever. And I don't know who hyped you up to try this, but fucking with me is the last thing you want to do. Whatever you were told, or you think you know, you don't. You don't know shit. So, I suggest you shut the fuck up, or you'll be picking up your teeth off the ground. You understand me?"

He doesn't say anything and stares at me with wide and panicked eyes. His face flushed, his body frozen stiff, and his nostrils flared.

"**WHAT? YOU SUDDENLY CAN'T TALK?**" I shake him, "**Huh?!**"

"That's enough."

Arms wrap around me from behind, yanking me off. My grip loosens and Jamison drops to the floor. I'm dragged backward, breathing uncontrollably.

Jamison lands hard on his feet, stumbling and struggling to catch his breath. Wheezing, he brings a hand to his chest, "Shit..."

"You got him." Donovan pants, holding my arms down to my sides, "You won, relax."

"We didn't get here in time." Elias breathes, standing between me and Jamison.

"Yeah, no shit." Zachary stands beside me, hunched over, "I'm just glad we got here before someone got their face beat in—"

Gesturing around us, he shouts, "**ALRIGHT, EVERYONE!!**

FUCKOFF!! NOTHING TO SEE HERE!!"

"C'mon, Sawyer." Tugging me to walk with him, Donovan says, "Let's go—"

"**HA**!!"

We stop, looking back at Jamison as he cackles. Shrugging Donovan off, I spit, "What's funny?"

"You, HA!! Dorian was right about you!!" Jamison laughs, "Talk about wild!! You're still that short-fused asshole you've always been--"

I push past Elias, and my fist collides into Jamison's face.

Blood leaks from his lip, running down his chin and shirt. He backs up into the wall, and I lunge toward him. Wasting no time, I land yet another punch to his face and grab him by his shirt.

His nose starts bleeding, and I only get two more punches in before Elias, Donovan, and Zachary attempt to stop me.

Donovan grabs my right arm, and Elias grabs the left, "He's done, Sawyer!!"

"Seriously!!" Zachary adds, grabbing my shoulders.

Despite their efforts, I don't budge nor loosen my grip on him. I'm drawing my fist back again, someone appears from the crowd-

"**WHAT ON EARTH IS HAPPENING?!**" Ms. Smith, the principal, shouts over the commotion,

Three teachers jump in, pulling me back. Panting, I stumble back and my grip loosens on Jamison's shirt. He drops to the floor, holding his face as blood continues rolling down his chin.

Swallowing, my fists and body twitch and shake as I stand over him.

"Good...god..." Ms. Smith stares in disbelief, "What happened?"

"Damn, look what you did to his face..." Donovan cringes, "Hate to be that guy..."

"**TO MY OFFICE.**" Ms. Smith whips around to face us, "**NOW**."

12: Gauze

[image] [image] [image]

SAWYER

Quickly, teachers usher Elias, Donovan, Zachary, and me away from the crowd. I stumble as I go, the teachers and the guys talking to me.

"Sawyer, say something." Donovan whispers, concerned, "Talk to me."

"You alright??" Elias asks. "Sawyer?" Zachary says, trying to get my attention.

They go on to say more things, but I can't hear them. My mind is too busy replaying everything that happened in a loop.

All I can think about is...how I wanted to keep going...

Finally, we escape the crowd, and the first person I see is **Dorian**. I glare at him as he smirks, nudging his friends and muttering things.

That bastard-

I freeze when I notice someone else. Our eyes lock, and my stomach drops as **Marianne** stares in disbelief. Hands close to her face and gawking at me, her lips are parted.

My throat dries up.

She wasn't supposed to see that...

After a moment, I look away, staring down at my bloody, bruised knuckles as I walk toward the principal's office.

I sit silently, my head against the wall behind me, as my leg bounces. I crack my sore knuckles a few times, my adrenaline still up, and my nerves are bad.

Glancing at the clock above the secretary's chair, I see only fifteen minutes have passed.

Damn, it feels like I've been sitting here for hours...

After arriving at the office, I washed my hands and was instructed to sit here and wait until Ms. Smith returned. The secretary left, probably off to help Jamison and his lumped-up face.

My jaw tightens and my fists clench as I replay everything that happened again. I look at my hands.

He had some hard teeth...

The guys are outside the office, talking with teachers about the situation and telling them what happened.

So, it's just me. Waiting.

I glance at the window behind me and spot the guys still talking to teachers.

Donovan looks at me with worry written all over his face. He nudges Elias and Zachary, and they look too. They all wave, but I gaze up at the ceiling. I bite the inside of my cheek.

I promised I wouldn't do this anymore. I promised Evan, Peanut, the guys, and everyone. But damn, the guy was asking for it.

I gnaw on my lip, glancing at the open door of the principal's office. I swallow, knowing what's going to happen. The longer I stare at it, the more my mind wanders to Marianne.

My chest aches and I find myself remembering how she was standing there when everything went down.

She saw.
How much of it did she see, I don't know, but she saw. That was the last person I wanted to see me like that, and now because of it she might-

I stop mid-thought, hating that that's even a possibility now. And to think, I have no one to blame except myself for losing my cool.

I try to push the thought from my head, but fuck, my mind is racing.

I can't stop thinking about that; now I'm thinking about other things. Like that asshat Jamison and why he said anything about Dorian. Seems like I was right. They were talking shit and even planned some bullshit to set me up.

My anger worsens as I think about it and what he said. About my mother and my family. Speaking on shit, he knows nothing about.

I bring a hand to my chest, feeling for the dogtag under my hoodie. The one she gave me before everything went to shit. We were close. I was a "mama's boy," that's for sure.

Suddenly, the office door swings open, and I look. To my relief/ surprise, it's just my wrestling coach, Mr. Malcom. I stare in silence, and he stares back.

As we gaze intensely at one another, not saying a word, his expression becomes less serious and softens.

Now I feel even more like shit. He's disappointed in me; I know he is. I promised him too.

I look away, "I know you're disappointed..."

"I'm not."

I choose not to say anything, but I can feel his eyes on me. He stands there, as the door softly shuts behind him. The dreadful silence goes on longer than I'd like before he asks, "I never said I was, but I gotta ask...what happened out there?"

I still don't say anything. I refuse to meet his gaze.

Walking up to me, he asks, "You don't have to say everything, but..."

Finally, I reply, staring at the floor, "...got mad..."

"Clearly." Mr. Malcom replies, sounding tired, "You did a number on him, kid."

Suddenly, the office door opens, and I hear heels thud against the floor. "Ms. Smith." Mr. Malcom says warmly. "Mr. Malcom."

She says politely, the door shutting behind her, "Thank you for being here."

Slowly, I look up and find that she's already staring at me. I tense up, knowing how this conversation is going to go. She knows me too damn well.

Ms. Smith, **Gabrielle Smith**, and Alejandro have been friends since childhood. They grew up together since our families are close.

That said, she knows everything that happened when Evan, Peanut, and I were growing up. About Leena and the abuse we endured before she went to prison. She's been the principal here for only two years.

Her eyes soft and concerned, Ms. Smith adjusts her blazer, clears her throat, and motions for me to follow, "Come to my office, Sawyer."

I glance over at Mr. Malcom, and he urges me to go. With a tired sigh, I stand up and walk past Mr. Malcom to the office. I enter the room, and Ms. Smith closes the door behind me.

"I know what you're going to say." I mumble as she walks around me and goes to her desk.

She sits on top of it, tugging at her pants as she crosses her legs, "Do you?"

"You say it every time."

To that, she looks up at me, meeting my gaze, and raising a brow, "What do you think I'm going to say?"

"What you always say when shit like this happens."

"**Language**."

I look down at my feet, balling my hands up into fists. The room

falls silent as she stays staring at me with a stern expression.

After a few quiet seconds, she says softly, "Well, since you know what I'm going to say, then obviously you know as well as I know...how I feel about fighting. Violence is never the answer, you know that. You talk it out or—"

"Walk away. I know." I reply stiffly, "And you're right. But you gotta know that he had it coming."

"He did?"

"Yes. And I know violence isn't the answer, or whatever, but he was talking about shi-***THINGS*** he doesn't know anything about. Like he just knew everything. I warned him, but he didn't listen."

I gesture behind me, "That's on him for not taking the out when he had it. He started it. He shouldn't have said anything if he couldn't back it up. And I'm positive he did this on purpose. The asshole said something about how he knew this would work or some shit. Either way, he didn't stop when he needed to—"

"Sawyer, sit down."

Dropping into my seat, I cross my arms. I stop talking, my jaw tight as I heave a heavy sigh. Looking everywhere but at her, I shake my head, feeling annoyed.

A few moments of silence go by before she says, "I hear you. I swear I do. And I know you."

I glance at her as she continues, "I know how you operate, and you never do anything unprovoked or without reason. And for Jamison to say what he said about you and what you've been through is unacceptable."

I lean back in my seat, swallowing, "...right..."

Eyes softening, she says tenderly, "You've been through a lot. More than he or anyone can ever imagine. Do I wish you could've handled things differently? Sure. But I am not mad about your decision. Honestly, if it were anyone else, they'd probably do the

same."

A part of me relaxes, glad to know she isn't too upset with what I've done.

"So, with that being said," She explains smoothly, "I feel like I should tell you that this isn't the first time Mr. Wilcott has been "attacked unwarranted". This seems to happen frequently with him."

"He said that?" I blurt.

"More or less. His words exactly were, 'All I said was 'hi', and he started fighting me for no reason.' Or something like that."

That little-

Standing up, I reach for the door handle, "He's in the nurse's office, right?"

Obviously, I didn't beat the shit out of him enough.

"**DO NOT**."

Motioning to the chair in front of her, she says, "**Sit.**" Groaning, I plop back down in my seat, and she states, "He's done. Poor kid's been through enough, don't you think?"

FUCK NO.

If he can talk shit after that, the lesson was not learned.

Standing up from her spot, she walks around the desk and sits in her chair, "Now, to get more serious here, today's incident has put you in a...predicament. And though I am not upset about what happened, you are still getting punished for what you did."

I pause, brows furrowing, "Wait, what?"

"Yes."

"What about him? You're going to let him get away after purposely provoking me?"

"I never said that I was letting him get away with anything. But you let me worry about that. You need to worry about yourself." She explains firmly, "What you did can get you in more trouble than what I've decided to do. You can be taken off the wrestling team for this, but Mr. Malcom and I decided otherwise."

I stop, taken aback by the statement.

I got a full-ride scholarship because of wrestling...and to think I about fucked it all up...

"Technically, there's more trouble you're supposed to be in, but academically, you're outstanding. You're at the top of your class, and your records as of recently are clear. So, as punishment, you're suspended for the rest of the week, and next Monday."

My shoulders deflate.

It's less than I expected, to be honest.

Sounding awkward, she says, "I love you, Sawyer. I do, but as your principal, I can't exclude you from punishment. Trust me, I would, but—"

"That's fine."

She pauses as I reply, "I'm okay with that."

Smiling a little, Ms. Smith replies, "Oh...well, as long as you understand." Grabbing some paperwork, she stacks it, "You are dismissed for the rest of the day. I contacted Alejandro, your father, and Evan, so they know you'll be going home now."

"Right." I stand, "Thanks."

"Of course."

Turning to head out the door, I reach for the handle, but then Ms. Smith says, "Oh, and Sawyer??"

I look back at her, and she smiles warmly, "Despite what's happened, I hope you know I'm proud of you."

I soften as she continues, "I know how you can get down on yourself for doing something you didn't mean to. I know you made a promise, but I don't think anyone would be upset. I know I'm not. I'm always going to be proud of you, mijo. That hasn't changed."

"Now, go have a...better day."

I sigh, "Thank you...tia Gabby."

I exit the office and enter the lobby. As soon as I do, I find Donovan, Elias, Zachary, and Mr. Malcom talking. I freeze, and as soon as the door creaks shut, they whip around to face me.

I look among them, surprised.

But, before I can say a word, Donovan spouts, "**SAWYER**!!" They rush me, shouting-

"**DUDE, YOU OKAY?!**"

"**HOLY SHIT, ARE YOUR HANDS OKAY?!**"

"**THAT WAS PROBABLY THE CRAZIEST FIGHT I'VE EVER SEEN!! BUT ARE YOU GOOD?!**"

They continue asking me questions, making comments, and shit. I glance at Mr. Malcom, and he chuckles, crossing his arms, "I think they were worried about you."

Gee, I hadn't noticed...

"And before you say anything—" Donovan pats my arm, "Coach said you thought he was disappointed in you."

"He's not. And neither are we." Elias chimes in, and I look over at him. "He deserved it for talking shit." Zachary agrees confidently.

"Especially for bringing...***that*** up." Donovan says empathetically, "Piece of shit. He had no idea what he was saying."

Before I could stop it, I nod, feeling at ease.

You know, as much as they get on my nerves...

I'm glad that they're here.

We've been through some shit over the years, so it's good that they're around.

Sappy dumbasses...

"If anything, we wanted to fight for you." Elias says, and the guys agree.

"How'd you even know about the fight?" I ask.

Scoffing, Donovan says matter-of-factly, "I'm always in 'The Know' Sawyer. It was buzzing around school that Jamison was going to try some shit with you."

So people knew about this?
I'm about to be angry all over again-

"So, what did Gab-I mean, Ms. Smith say?" Elias raises a brow.
"Suspended for a week." I shrug.

"**You are**?" They ask in unison.

"Yeah. I'm going home."

"Well, beats anything else.'" Mr. Malcom smirks, and I shift my attention to him, "I wouldn't want anything worse happening to one of my best."

I shoot him a nod, and he returns it.

"**Suspended**...well—" Donovan mumbles, scratching his chin, "If you're not going to school for a week...**so am I**."

"Me too." Elias agrees. "Same." Zachary chimes in.

I stare in disbelief, "That's...skipping—"

"Doesn't matter." Donovan interrupts, and I frown.

"As your best friends, Sawyer," Donovan grabs my shoulder. I look from him to his hand as he dramatically continues, "we go where you go. If you dance, we dance. And if you don't, we dance anyway —"

"Shut up." I shrug him off.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear any of you say you're skipping school for a week," Mr. Malcom chuckles, walking over to stand beside us, "I'll see all of you, except Sawyer, on Monday, correct?"

"Oh yeah!!" Elias smirks, "Wouldn't miss it, coach!!"

"We'll be here!!" Zachary laughs, "All week!!"

"Yeah, I'm not coming, and I'm not lying about it either." Donovan says dryly.

"Don..." Looking at him dumbfounded, Elias says, "We're being sarcastic..."

"Oh shit-seriously?"

Zachary and Elias stare at him, dumbfounded, as Donovan stares back, bewildered.

They forget that Donovan doesn't just act stupid.

He ***is*** stupid.

"Yes. Yes, we are." Elias replies. "Well, I couldn't tell." Donovan rebuts, sticking his nose in the air, "You're not good at that."

Mr. Malcom laughs harder as the guys argue about whether it was obvious that was sarcasm, or if Donovan was being a dumbass.

You know what I'd say.

We exit the office lobby, and the guys talk to the coach about wrestling. It's mostly Donovan, though. He's apparently planning to join the team this year.

"Don, you're a lightweight in the most literal sense." Elias laughs, "And we're about to graduate too!! Why now?"

"Cause I can."

"You really plan on trying out?" Mr. Malcom smirks, raising a brow. Looking at him, Donovan chirps, "Yeah!! What do you say? You think I can make the team?"

"We'll see how you look when November rolls around, 'kay bud?"

*" **Sawyer** ?"*

I tense up, recognizing that melodic tone from anywhere. Immediately, we all look to our right and find Marianne standing there. I freeze, my heart skipping a beat as our eyes meet. My throat goes dry.

Shit.

"Who's that?" Mr. Malcom whispers. "Sawyer's girlfriend." Elias replies, and I shoot him a look.

He looks the other way, and I glare as Zachary snickers, "We should give them some time alone."

"We'll be at your locker, bud." Donovan grins smugly, and they walk down the hall, snickering.

Assholes...

Looking back at Marianne, I start feeling unsettled. My eyes search hers, dreading what she could say.

She saw.

I can't stop thinking about that. And the look on her face.

Sheepish, I pathetically stammer, "I...I— "

*" **ARE YOU OKAY** ?"*

I pause as she speedily approaches. My mind draws a blank as I

stare like a deer in the headlights.

Standing in front of me, she says, "I heard what happened!! And I saw it!! Well, not all of it, just, like, the last part, but yeah!! And I saw the other guy, oh god, he looked horrible!! I think he lost a tooth!!"

Like I said would happen-

"And-and I was in the bathroom way longer than I was supposed to be!! But there was this girl, and she was crying, so I sat with her! But then I heard commotion outside and-and I saw how angry you were!!" She explains, "And-I was so worried!!"

"Worried?" I echo.

"Uh, yeah!! Of course I was!! I was worried you'd get in trouble, or —" Eyes widening, she grabs my wrists, "Oh wait-what did the principal say?"

"Uh...I'm suspended for a week."

"Are you? Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be." I shake my head, feeling flustered suddenly, "You...didn't do anything wrong."

"But I hate that for you. That sucks."

It only sucks 'cause I won't see you-

"How are your hands?" Grabbing my palms, she carefully examines the backs of my fingers, gently tracing my knuckles. Cringing, she mumbles, "Ouch, looks painful..."

"Not really..." I mumble, distracted. Looking up at me, she raises a brow, "You sure?"

"Positive."

"Well...put an icepack on it when you get home. I'm sure that'll help. Also—"

Reaching into her pocket, Marianne pulls out a roll of gauze. My eyes widen as she explains, "I got this." Smirking a bit, she whispers, "I snuck it out of the nurse's office when nobody was there...like a ninja."

You've got to be kidding-

"I'm sure your hands are sore." Unrolling it, she holds it up to me, "May I?"

I nod wordlessly as she wraps the gauze around my fingers and knuckles. The feel of her hands gently holding mine lingers a lot longer than expected. They're soft. So incredibly soft and warm.

I flush at these thoughts, as she finishes, "There."

She looks up at me and smiles that smile. My eyes search hers for a moment when I blurt, "You don't care about what happened?"

Her brows furrow, "What do you mean?"

"The fight. You saw...didn't you?"

People would avoid me after fights like that. Til' this day, people actively dodge me, saying I'm violent. Troubled. Problematic. Just a ball of anger-issues with baggage.

I only hope she doesn't see me differently for this.
Like everyone else has...

Thoughtful, she replies, "Well...yes. But...only the ending. All I know is...you were upset. Like, really upset. So...I just knew that that guy had to have said or done something crappy for you to do all of that." Softly, she adds, "You don't typically do things like that, so...to be honest...I'm just glad you're okay."

All the tension leaves my shoulders along with all my worries. Like someone popping a balloon.

"It just sucks that you're suspended." Marianne huffs, tilting her head. I grab her hands, "It's just a week."

This isn't my first rodeo...

"Yeah, but," She mutters, as I intertwine our fingers, "who am I gonna pick on while you're gone?"

I grimace, and she giggles. And while I'm supposed to be annoyed, I can't help the way my frown gives way. A warm sensation fills my chest.

It's stupid and horribly sappy.

Truly a feeling...only she can give me...

"I'm kidding!!" She sings. I tug her a little closer, closing the small distance between us, "Right."

"I am."

"Sure."

Swinging our hands, Marianne bites back a smile and I soften. A quiet moment passes as we stare at one another in when suddenly I remember, "Oh."

She raises a brow at my outburst as I let go of her hands, and dig into my pocket, "I would've given this to you at a better time—"

I grab those cookies I bought earlier and Marianne's eyes widen. I stiffly clear my throat, "I...got you this." I hand them to her, "I know you like them, so..."

She marvels at them, "I do." She looks up at me, and grins, "Thank you."

I avoid her gaze, *"yep..."*

"I wasn't expecting that..." She sits in thought before nudging me, ***"You're so sweet."***

Sweet ?

"No, I'm not." My ears burn, "Stop saying that."

"But you are!! When you wanna be!!" She opens her cookies, "You are capable of kindness, I knew it!!"

I roll my eyes, but stop when she holds up two cookies. Blinking, I look between her and them as she asks, "Want some?"

I don't eat sweets...
But-

"Sure."

I take them and she happily nods, eating some cookies too as we walk down the hall side by side.

"Shouldn't you be heading to class?" I ask, chewing, "You hate being late."

"Eh, I'm okay with it." She skips a little, "Just this once."

13: Rumor Has It

[image] [image] [image] [image]

MARIANNE

"**He got suspended**."

"Wait, really? That's all after what he did to Jamison?"

"I can't believe that."

"I can. He probably threatened the principal for this."

"Have y'all seen the video?"

"Yeah, Jamison didn't deserve that."

"And you wanna know what else? I heard the fight was about the new girl."

"Actually?"

"I heard that too!!"

"I bet Larissa threw a fit. We all know that she's delusional when it comes to Sawyer." Silence follows after that and the girl nervously spouts, "But, like, don't tell her I said that. I'm looking forward to going to her Halloween party this year."

"My lips are sealed, aha!!"

"What's the new girl's name again? Isn't it, like, Maria, Mary, or something?"

I stiffen in my seat at the mention of my name.

Well...kind of my name ...

I glance up from my computer to see my classmates sitting in front

of me, chit-chatting. Suddenly, they glance behind them and in my direction, and my eyes drop to my computer again.

Clearing my throat, I try to pretend not to be suspicious, uncomfortably tugging at my collar.

How unfortunate. A 'Series of Unfortunate Events,' you can even say —

I'm sorry...

I feel their eyes on me, and I pretend to be reading something really interesting (I'm drawing circles with my mouse). Finding some courage, I look up again, only to find they're still staring. My eyes immediately drop back to my keyboard.

"Isn't that her?" The girl on the left whispers. In a questionable tone, the guy in the middle replies, "Yeah, I think so..."

"Hmm..." The girl to the right of the boy hums.

The bell rings, and I close my computer. Jumping up, I frantically gather my things. Shoving everything into my bag, I grab my latte and rush out of the room. I slide past people and into the hall, weaving through more people.

Eventually, I arrive at the restrooms, fly in, enter the nearest stall, and shut the door. I plop onto the toilet seat, trying to catch my breath. Looking down at my cup in my lap, I take a deep breath.

I hated that...
People staring...reminded me too much of my old school...

I shudder, "Gosh, now I hate that that crossed my mind..." I push those memories aside, "Ugh. When will people talk about something else..."

Since everything happened Monday, everyone's talked about it nonstop. Online and offline. It's Friday, and there's a video of the fight circulating, rumors spreading, and I've been dragged into it.

Supposedly, I was the reason for the fight.

And as confused as I am, I've decided to let it be. At the end of the day, people will believe and talk about whatever they want to believe and talk about.

A part of me feels somber that I'll be going to my next class without Sawyer.

"This sucks..." I sip my drink, "I miss his grumpy and...broody...ness."

When I got to school this morning, I realized today would be another dull day since Sawyer's suspension.

No one to tell jokes to.
No one to sit with.
No one to ramble to.
No grumpy comments.
No crosswords.
No big-brain books.
No frowning.

Nothing.

We've been texting, but it's not the same as seeing him. And it doesn't help that the boys haven't come to school either. I have Daisy and Skipper but no Donovan, Elias, or Zachary.

I've grown so used to them being around that it's starting to feel like our group isn't a group without them.

"Then they stared at me like I was the crazy one."

"That's creepy, and Maria? Seriously?" Daisy scoffs, "That's not even close to your name."

"I know. But yeah, that's what happened. Figured I'd let you in on some of the new stuff the school's been yapping about." I sigh, "There's something new every day."

"I don't get how you got roped into this drama with Sawyer and Jamison anyway. I don't see the correlation."

"Yeah, me neither, but maybe it's because people see Sawyer and me walking together a lot." I grab my water bottle, "Apparently there's a video."

"I saw it. Sawyer decked him right in the mouth." Daisy smirks, "Wilcott didn't stand a chance, mhm. I never liked him, he's an ass. I have the video, wanna watch?"

"No thanks. I'm just ready for this to blow over."

"Me and you both." She motions to my lunchbox, "What'd you pack for lunch?"

"Leftover chicken soup Aunt Cass made last night." I shrug, "Oh, and some Reese's."

"May I partake?"

I giggle, "You may." I slide her one, and she takes it, grinning.

*" **Urgh** !!"*

Daisy and I look and find Skipper approaching the table, stomping. She plops down in her seat, crossing her arms.

I raise a brow as she flips her hair, angrily muttering, *"So damn stubborn..."*

"You okay, Skipper?" I ask, concerned. "How'd your secret phone call go?" Daisy chimes in, "Not good, huh?"

Skipper disappeared to answer an "urgent" call a few minutes ago. I'm pretty sure it was a guy, but she hasn't told Daisy or me about him if it is.

"I'm fine, it was fine. I'm just...frustrated." Skipper rolls her eyes while opening her lunchbox.

"Wanna talk about it?" I suggest, "It might help."

"Yeah, and tell us about the new man." Daisy sassily adds.

"Marianne, tell me a fun-fact." Skipper blurts, completely ignoring Daisy, and I pause. "Or don't tell us..." Daisy narrows her eyes as she eats her Reese's cup.

"Tell you a...fun-fact?" I echo, "What kind?" Shrugging, Skipper sighs, "I don't know. Something...weird."

Usually, they don't ever ask me about facts. Especially Skipper. Thinking, I tap my chin, "Hm...oh-I got it!! Did you know that Platypuses sweat milk??"

"Ew," Skipper frowns, "What?"

"Pfft!!" Daisy scoffs, "No, they don't." I give Daisy a look, and she stares at me sternly, "Are you being for real?"

"Yes."

"No."

"I tell no lies."

She whips out her phone, "I'm looking this up."

I should tell Sawyer that. I wonder what he'd say. He'd probably ask me why I know that and call me weird.

"**Okay! I'm saying it!**" Skipper blurts, sounding defeated. Daisy and I look at her as she sets her apple down, *"Gosh...**I'm saying it**..."*

"Pardon?" Daisy blinks, and I slurp up the last of my soup. "**I'm gonna say it**." Skipper insists, "**Right now**."

"Okay." I hum, "What are we saying?"

She stares at Daisy and me scowling, and my confusion worsens.

"Is this about Andrew?" Daisy asks promptly, "If so, I told you he only wanted to hunch and leave. And we all know you two already hunched it up."

Unexpectedly, I snort, and Skipper turns to Daisy in horror as she

continues, "We saw the hickies, plus how you were practically glowing afterwards—"

"No-What? No. This isn't about—what?" Skipper babbles, cheeks flushing, "I dumped him ***weeks*** ago, Daisy."

I remember that. I came home from work and piano practice, and Skipper's neck looked like someone was trying to brand her. She had me and Daisy cover them before she went home.

"Oh." Daisy drawls, "It's not? Well...what is it?"

"I was ***going*** to say," Skipper looks her up and down in judgment, "As much as I hate to say...I miss sitting and talking to the guys."

My eyes widen and Daisy's do too.

"Wow, that's surprising coming from you." Daisy comments. "Very." I agree, "Does that include Donovan?"

"Ew! No!! He's an idiot..." She huffs, but there's a brush of pink on her cheeks following that. I let out a quiet giggle.

As much as she claims to 'hate' him, I think Skipper, deep down, really likes having Donovan around.

"Right." I snort, "I miss the guys too!"

"Yeah." Daisy nods, "I've gotten used to sitting with them. That's something I didn't think would happen."

"So, I'm not the only one? Good." Skipper sighs in relief, "I was hoping so."

"'Course not!! Honestly, I didn't think the guys would skip school because Sawyer couldn't come."

"I did. Those boys follow Sawyer around like baby ducklings. If Sawyer doesn't do something, neither do they. It's a boy thing, I guess." Skipper laughs.

"This is true." Daisy smiles, "Jason does the same thing. If his friends

aren't doing something, neither does he."

"So, it is a boy thing." I mumble. "Secret Boy Stuff." Daisy giggles, "As Jason likes to say."

I laugh, "I feel like it's accurate." Skipper smiles, "It probably is. Those boys do whatever, according to what Donovan's told me—"

"**I miss my boyfriend, guys**!!" Daisy abruptly wails, causing us to jump, "**I miss Jason**!!"

Skipper shoots her a look as she continues, "I just love him so much!! And his cute, handsome face!! His dorky glasses, his jokes, his hoodies, his-***EVERYTHING***!! I just love him!! I hate this long-distance crap!! I want him here with me now!! Not later!!"

*"**We know**."* Skipper says dryly, and I laugh.

"I'm sorry..." Daisy frowns, "I know I talk about it a lot. It's just...this long-distance stuff is hard, and—"

Suddenly, her phone rings, and she perks up. Grabbing it, she reads, and her eyes light up, "**HE'S CALLING**."

Wasting no time, she flies out of the lunchroom, answering her phone, "Hi, baby!! I was just thinking about you!!"

Skipper rolls her eyes, and I laugh. Reaching into my bag, I pull out a Reese's cup when suddenly a group of girls approaches the table. Skipper and I stop and look to see Larissa standing there with her friends.

*"**Oh hell no**..."* Skipper frowns.

"And a ***hello*** to you too, Anderson." Larissa says, her friends standing around her, "Great to see you."

"What do you want, Kingston?" Skipper scowls, "And don't think I'm not two seconds off you for what you said to Marianne."

"Woah, calm your tits. You act like I tried to kill her." Larissa laughs, "And can't a girl come over to say *'hi'?"*

"**No. Bye.**"

I haven't talked to Larissa or her friends since that day in the hallway when they stopped me. Ever since then, she's only given me looks across the hallway.

I was more than okay with that, and was even grateful for it. I'd rather steer clear of drama.

I told Daisy and Skipper about that day, and needless to say, they were upset. They never liked Larissa to begin with, so that only made their distaste for her worse.

"Ooo, sassy." Larissa grins, "Typical of you." Skipper glares as she continues, "But I've got more to say."

Turning to me, Larissa blurts, "I'm sure we're aware of the chatter floating around about Sawyer and Jamison." Giving me a onceover, she scoffs, "And I'm sure you out of everyone is getting a kick out of it since you're the cause."

Not this again...

I frown, "I'm not getting a kick out of anything."

"Is that all you wanted?" Skipper impatiently asks, "Was that?"

"No doy, why else would I be here?" Larissa snorts, and her friends do too, "I'm curious about what's going through your head." She motions to me, "Especially after our little talk last week."

She tilts her head, "Any thoughts? You were so insistent about making your own opinions, has that changed?"

Silent, I stare at her, the noise of the cafeteria blending into the background. Her blue eyes fiery with anticipation, Larissa places her hands on her hips and glares at me dryly.

She's not going to let this go, is she?

"Ughh, go away." Skipper groans, "Marianne's not answering that—"

"**Nothing**."

Skipper whips around to face me, surprised, and Larissa raises a brow as I continue firmly, "It's still the same as before." Larissa's eyes narrow, and I add, "I'm making my own opinions. That hasn't changed."

She remains silent, jaw tight, and her friends spare her nervous glances. Skipper only blinks at me, squeezing her lips shut, and I swallow at the thick quiet.

AHEM -
Awkward...

"And you're deadset on that?" Larissa asks tightly.

"I am." I nod, "Probably not what you wanted to hear."

She cracks a condescending smile, *"Hmph..."* Giving me one last onceover, she turns away, *"I've heard enough."*

Fluffing her hair, she sashays away, her friends trailing behind her. Once they're across the cafeteria and disappearing into the crowds, I deflate, *"Phew...I was so hoping I wouldn't have to deal with that again..."*

I glance at Skipper, *"Wishful thinking, huh?"*

She stares at me dumbfounded, and I pause. Silence falls over us, and I blink confusedly.

Did I miss something?

I look around us, "Um—" I settle my gaze on her, "Did something happen?"

"**Girl**!" Skipper chortles, "I thought I'd have to defend your honor, but look at you!" Sheepishly, I laugh as she brings a hand to her chest, swooning, "Aw, I feel like a proud parent."

I fiddle with my bracelet, *"It's really not a big deal..."*

"**Did Kingston just walk away from here?**"

We turn to find Daisy standing in front of our table, expression serious. "Yeah, she came over to talk shit." Skipper explains, and Daisy instantly scowls.

Glowering in Larissa's direction, Daisy grumbles, "That skank, what did she want?"

"To be a bitch, but don't worry—" Skipper slings an arm around me, and I yelp, "Mari made her leave!"

Daisy's jaw drops, and she settles her eyes on mine, "Wait-what?"

"Yea!!"

"Oh-em-gee!!"

I'm soon crowded by both of them, and I nervously laugh as they throw praises and cheers my way.

*" **My baby want a Birkin** ."*

*" **She's been tellin' me all night long** ."*

*" **Gasoline and groceries, the list goes on and on** ."*

Daisy, Skipper, and I sing in unison as we cruise down the street. Skipper drives with one hand out her window and the other on the wheel. She laughs a little while listening to Daisy and me sing loudly.

"This nine to five ain't workin', why the hell do I work so hard?" Daisy claps, sitting in the passenger seat, ***"I can't worry 'bout my problems, I can't take 'em when I'm gone!!"***

"**ONE!! HERE COMES THE TWO TO THE THREE TO THE FOUR!!**" I pump my fist in the backseat.

"**TELL 'EM BRING ANOTHER OUT; WE NEED PLENTY MORE**!!" Daisy throws her hands up in the air.

"**TWO STEPPIN' ON THE TABLE, SHE DON'T NEED A DANCEFLOOR**!!" Skipper waves her hand out the window.

"**OH MY**!!" We sing in unison, "**GOOD LORD**!!"

It's been a few hours since school let out.

After school, I went home, changed into comfier clothes, and said goodbye to Aunt Cassie. We decided to visit Francis and help at her thrift store, hungout and chit-chatted with her like we usually do.

We spent most of the time there before saying our goodbyes and leaving to get something to eat since we all found ourselves hungry.

After a long while of being indecisive about what we wanted, we went to the restaurant Skipper works at and even got our food on the house. Perks of having a friend that everyone loves.

Currently, the girls and I are driving to my house!! We usually take the long way around to get there so that we can listen to music and vibe out.

Tonight's theme is, "A Bar Song (Tipsy)" by Shaboozey.

"I love this song!!" Skipper grins as we approach a stop sign. "Me too!!" I agree, "Aren't you glad I got the aux? Last time, you guys wouldn't let me."

Laughing, Skipper explains, "It's not that we wouldn't; it's just that Daisy always automatically connected."

Nodding, I reply, "You're right."

Skipper and I look at Daisy, eyes narrowed. Daisy frowns, looking between us, "I do not!!"

"Yes, you do!!" Skipper laughs matter-of-factly as we start driving again, "Whenever we—"

A loud boom is heard out of nowhere, causing us to stop talking. Frantic, we look at one another in confusion. That didn't sound good.

"The fuck—" Skipper yelps, turning down the radio, "That sounded weird."

"It did." I mumble, uneasy. "I don't know." She grips the steering wheel, "Think I ran something over?"

"Don't know." Daisy replies, sounding unsure, "But it sounded like something popped."

"Don't say that." Skipper rebuts, fearful, "I don't think anything popped. I'm sure it's—"

There's a loud hissing sound outside the car, and we let out screams. I grip my seatbelt, looking out my window. One side of the car suddenly drops, and we jerk. None of us says a word about it, however.

We remain frozen, eyes wide as we exchange concerned, fearful glances. The only sounds are the low hum of the car and the air blowing in from the windows.

"I'm pulling over." Skipper announces.

Pulling over on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, Skipper throws the car into park. We all hop out, closing our doors.

We gather around to examine the car, our flashlights on our phones turned on. However, none of us find anything.

"Hm." I hum as Daisy and Skipper examine the front half of her jeep.

I head towards the back of the car, the flashlight still bright, and I point it down at the wheels and under the jeep. It's not long before I find the problem.

"Nothing here!!" Skipper calls out, "The front looks fine!!"

"Nothing on the sides!!" Daisy gives a thumbs-up. "Looks normal!! What about you, Marianne?"

"Um...I wish I had good news." I state, "We gotta flat back here on

the driver's side."

Chp. 14: Can We Get Ice Cream Now?

[image] [image] [image] [image]

MARIANNE

"Son of a bitch." Skipper groans as she and Daisy gather around to stare where my flashlight is pointed, "Are you kidding?"

"I wish." I murmur, "Even then, though, it'd be a bad joke..."

"Talk about luck. Just when we were four miles away from Marianne's, too..." Daisy adds, thoughtful, "Wait, isn't that the tire you just got replaced last week?"

"It is." Skipper affirms, "The one my cousin supposedly fixed. I'm gonna kick his ass next time I see him."

I kneel and examine the completely flattened tire. I trace the treads and grooves, noting the smoothness in them, "Yikes, it looks worn out..."

"It's supposed to be brand new." Skipper groans, rubbing her face tiredly.

Daisy and I watch in concern as she whines, "I can't believe this is happening!! Why now, when we're in the middle of nowhere?! Ugh!!"

"Hey, relax!!" I stand up. Grabbing her shoulder, I stop her from pacing, "It's going to be okay!! We'll figure this out!!"

"Yeah!! Just breathe." Daisy agrees, reaching over to rub Skipper's back. Skipper nods, taking a deep breath as I ask, "Now let's start with the basics!! You got a spare, right?"

"Yeah." She rubs her forehead, "But...I don't know how to change a tire."

"Do you know someone who does? Your Dad? Mom? Brother? That cousin?"

"Well, Mom doesn't know. Dad's still out of town for work. Austin works night shifts at the hospital this week. And like hell I'll ever trust Dylan with my car again. Plus, he has a curfew, and his mother probably won't let him come out this far."

She sits in thought momentarily, "But...I got one person I can ask. I just...didn't wanna call him..."

"Who?" Daisy and I ask.

"Uh...?"

Skipper digs into her jeans pocket and pulls out her phone. Putting her phone on speaker, she murmurs, "Someone..."

Daisy and I exchange a look, confused.

The phone rings briefly before someone answers, *"Yello?"*

Donovan?

"Hi, Donovan!!" Skipper's face flushes, "Whatcha doin'?"

"Watchin' TV, eating Chipotle." He chews, "Whatcha doin'?"

"Glad you asked..." She clears her throat, "I was on my way to drop Marianne and Daisy off at their houses, and, um...I got a flat. So...we're stuck on the side of the road...in the middle of nowhere."

"Oh shit, seriously?"

"Yeah."

"Damn. Are you okay? You didn't crash, did you? If so, you need to call the cops, not me."

"No. We're fine!! But...I was calling to ask you if you could...change my tire? I have a spare, so..."

"Um..."

We pause, awaiting an answer. Gathering around Skipper's phone, Daisy and I stare. Awkwardly, Donovan replies, "Well...I hate to disappoint you, Skips, but I am no good when it comes to cars and fixing them. And I'm not at home right now."

We let out sighs of despair, and Skipper frowns, "Really?"

"Yeah. Sorry." He mutters sympathetically, "I know nothing about that. But I do know someone who can help ya out." Skipper's eyes light up, "You do?"

"Yeah!! Of course!! You know I'm always in "The Know"!!"

"Right, so you know someone?"

"Yeah!"

"**OMG!! THANK YOU!!**" Skipper grins. Daisy and I also smile as Skipper sings, "**THANK YOU!!**"

"Don't mention it!!" Donovan chuckles, "I wouldn't leave you guys stranded. Send me your location, and we'll be on our way. Oh!! And look out for a red truck."

"Got it!! Thanks again!!" Skipper sings before hanging up. She looks at us, and we laugh and sing, gathering for a group hug, "**YAY**!!"

We sit on the hood of Skipper's jeep, eating leftover fries. I hold the basket in my lap, my legs dangling as I kick them in the air. Skipper's sitting on my right side, and Daisy's sitting on my left as they reach over and grab a few fries from my basket.

I smack my lips softly, lost in thought.

We propped Skipper's spare tire against her car. It took us longer than expected since we had to somehow detach it from the back of the car. We had tools and stuff, but still, it was hard.

"I hate cold fries." Daisy chews softly, "They're gross."

"I wouldn't say I hate them. But, like—" I slip another fry into my mouth, "obviously if I had the option to choose hot, fresh fries, I'd

choose those."

"Same." Skipper wipes her hands on her jeans, "Cold fries aren't terrible, but I wouldn't say I love them."

Giving me and Skipper a look, Daisy narrows her eyes, "You guys are strange."

Suddenly, we hear a horn blare, and we look to see a red, tall truck approaching. We watch, as they drive past, but pull over on the side of the road behind us. The truck stops, and I notice the tint on the back windshield.

All I can see is the outlines of two people's heads, and I know the one in the passenger seat is Donovan. But I wonder who's with him. Excited, Skipper slides off the hood of the jeep and runs over to the truck behind us.

Daisy quickly follows, and I yelp, "Guys, wait for me!" Shoving fries into my mouth, I join them.

Approaching the passenger window, Skipper smirks, "About time you showed!"

Gradually, the window rolls down, revealing Donovan and-

"**SAWYER**?" I, Daisy, and Skipper say in unison.

He freezes, eyes widening as he puts the car in park. He looks between us, before settling his gaze on me. Our eyes lock and I gawk at him.

Finishing the last of my fries, I grin, "Oh my gosh!! Hey!! I feel like I haven't seen you in forever!!"

"It's only been four days." He says flatly.

"Still!! I'm so used to seeing you at school!! It's weird!!" I giggle, "Plus, I wasn't expecting to see you!! Pleasant surprises, huh?"

He doesn't say anything at first; he just stares. Sighing though, he then turns away, "Yeah, whatever—"

"Pleasant surprises indeed, Marianne!! I figured Sawyer should join the party too!!" Donovan says brightly, "And for the record—" He leans in, glancing at Sawyer, "we almost didn't find you because Sawyer doesn't know his right from his left—"

"Shut up." Sawyer slaps Donovan upside the head, "You're the one who told me to turn left when we were supposed to turn right."

"**THAT HURT, ASSHOLE**." Donovan cringes.

"Stop saying dumb-shit."

"Oooo!!"

That doesn't sound like Donovan or Sawyer. I hear loud, girlish giggling echoing from the backseat, taking me off guard. Everyone ceases conversation, and Sawyer and Donovan look behind them.

"Why are you laughing, Peanut?" Sawyer frowns.

Daisy, Skipper, and I freeze when we hear a little girl's voice, cackling, "You guys said bad-words!! And you tell me all the time not to say them!! So—"

"**Still can't say them**." Sawyer interrupts, and she whines, "Don't even think about it. And don't tell Dad or Alejandro."

"Hmph...that's gonna cost you an ice cream..."

"Wait—" Skipper raises a hand, "Who's Peanut? And where's the person you were telling me about, Donovan?"

"I'm surprised you haven't realized, Skipper." Donovan snorts, "It's Sawyer."

Oh-

"Surprise!! Sawyer's a handyman!!" Donovan grins, grabbing Sawyer's shoulder. Sawyer shoots him a look as he continues, "Dude's been working on cars and stuff since we were in middle school!! Living on a farm will do that to ya, though!!"

"A farm?" I echo. "I lived with my uncle for a few years." Sawyer explains, glaring at Donovan, "He lives on a farm."

"Yep!! Alejandro's the best!!" Donovan shakes Sawyer, "Thanks to him, Sawyer knows everything there is to know!! Gotta problem? Ask him!!"

"You have five seconds to move your hand—" Sawyer warns, "before I do it for you—"

"**I'M PEANUT**!!"

A little girl with long, chestnut brown hair pokes her head out in between Sawyer and Donovan. With big, round eyes and a missing front tooth, she grins, "Hi!!"

Oh my gosh, she's so cute!!

"Hi." I wave, "Nice to meet you!!"

"Likewise!!" She chirps. Rubbing the top of her head, Donovan smiles, "This is Sawyer's sister!! She'll be accompanying us tonight, hope you don't mind."

"Um, no." Skipper says, surprised, "Not at all."

"Great!! Let's get this party started!!" Donovan flicks Skipper's nose. Immediately, she yelps, jerking her head away as she rubs her nose, "Ow—"

He chuckles as she glares, "What was that for?"

After gathering their things, Sawyer, Donovan, and Peanut hop out of the truck. Almost immediately, Peanut flies over to me, tackling my leg. I yelp on impact, stumbling a bit as she buries her face into me.

"Look at you, being a kid magnet." Daisy snorts, hands on her hips, "Kids always like you, Mari."

"Seems so." I laugh, patting Peanut's head.

"Quit harassing her, Peanut." Sawyer calls out, grabbing tools from the back of the truck, "We talked about this on the way here."

"I know!! But I'm excited!!" She sings, looking up to meet my gaze, "I know you!! You're Marianne!!" Shifting her attention to Daisy and Skipper, she adds, "And you're Daisy and Skipper!!"

"Woah." Skipper's eyes widen, "How—"

"Sawyer and I told her about you guys." Donovan explains, examining Skipper's tire, "Seems right since you guys are going to be around each other for a minute."

"Ah." I nod as Sawyer walks over and stands beside Donovan with a carjack, "I see."

"Yep!!" Peanut nods, "Sawyer and Don told me all about you guys!! About how you're friends and how cool you are!!"

She's too cute!!

And I just noticed she's wearing Sleeping Beauty-themed pajamas. Not to mention her slippers are also Sleeping Beauty-themed too.

"They've told me a lot!! Especially about you, Marianne!!"

I raise a brow, "Me?"

"Yeah!! Well, Donovan hasn't talked nearly as much as Sawyer!!"

My cheeks flush as she continues, "Sawyer's said a lot!!"

"Oh yeah? What's he say?" Skipper asks curiously as she and Daisy inch closer. Looking at them, Peanut grins, "All sorts of stuff!! He talks about her all the time!! He comes home from school talking and saying all this nice stuff about her!! And he was right!! You are super prett—"

"**That's enough**."

We look up and find Sawyer standing there. Pouting, Peanut boos, "No boys allowed!! This is girl-talk!!"

"You're talking about me, of course I'm allowed." Sawyer dryly states.

"No!!"

"Yes."

They go back and forth, arguing in a very brotherly and sisterly manner. Skipper, Daisy, and I laugh. As they continue, I take a moment to examine Sawyer's outfit.

A simple black tank top, the dogtag necklace, grey sweatpants, and white Nikes.

My gaze lingers on his tank top, and I notice his arms and shoulders are...***broad***. I've never seen him in a tank top before, and woah, he really is super fit and musc-

AHEM-

Moving on...

I conclude that all Sawyer owns are hoodies, compression shirts, and sweatpants. Today I discovered he wears tank tops, so that's new. All his clothes are either black, grey, or white.

Occasionally I see him in T-shirts, but that's rare.

"You can't do that!!" Peanut whines, and Sawyer rolls his eyes. He crosses his arms, "Just did. And I don't talk about Marianne like that."

"Yes, you do!! Last night, you said—"

"**Enough**."

Peanut laughs hysterically, and I pause, thinking about what she was going to say only moments ago. Subtly, Sawyer glances at me, and I swear I see a light shade of pink paint his cheeks. And despite the dim light from the car's headlights, I can still see it. He's blushing.

I find myself giggling, and his gaze hardens.

Turning toward Peanut, he clears his throat, "Stop making stuff up and quit harassing Marianne. You didn't even ask to hug her."

"It's okay!! I don't mind!!" I chime in, "Who doesn't enjoy a good hug?"

"Don't encourage her."

Peanut tightens her hold around me, "She said she doesn't mind!! You're just jealous that you don't get to hug her like I can!!"

Eyes wide, Sawyer's cheeks darken as Donovan, Daisy, and Skipper all say 'Ooo'.

"She told you." Skipper coos.

"I like her!!" Daisy sings.

"**I couldn't care less about a dumb hug**." Sawyer grits, "**I don't like hugs, so why would I be jealous**?"

Pointing at him accusingly, Peanut shouts, "JEALOUS!!"

"Phew!!" Donovan wipes his brow as he tosses the carjack into the bed of the truck, "All in a day's work!!"

"And what "work" did you do exactly?" Sawyer closes his toolbox, "Besides handing me tools?"

"Moral support!!" Donovan says proudly, "That's a lot of work, y'know."

"Right..."

"Thanks again!!" Skipper says cheerfully, looking between Donovan and Sawyer, "I appreciate it!! I wouldn't have known what to do if you hadn't come."

"No problem, Skips!!" Donovan grins.

"Don't mention it." Sawyer shrugs.

"Oh-good!" Peanut sings. Looking at me, Daisy, and Skipper, she adds, "I'm glad your car is fixed!!"

The whole time Sawyer and Donovan were fixing the car; Peanut stuck to my side like glue. It seemed like she didn't want to go anywhere else. She held my hand and talked the entire time.

And while we talked, I realized she reminds me a lot of Sawyer, but in a different font.

Smart, blunt, and honest. She's not grumpy, but she and Sawyer are the same. She also likes crosswords, reading, and is a dancer.

Turns out the truck Sawyer's driving is his Dad's, and from what Peanut told us, Sawyer loves cars. She also told us that she and Sawyer have another sibling. His name is Evan and he's the oldest out of the three.

Didn't think Sawyer would be the middle child.

I thought for sure he was the oldest.

"Can we get ice cream now?" Peanut asks aloud.

"Ice cream?" Sawyer echoes, raising a brow as he places the toolbox into the back of the truck, "It's too late for ice cream, Peanut—"

"But you promised!!"

"When?"

"In the car, you said you'd take me so I wouldn't tell Daddy and Alejandro about you and Don cussin'."

"I never said that." Sawyer frowns, and Donovan chuckles.

"I guess I'll have to tell." Peanut shakes her head disappointedly, "They won't like that..."

"Ooo," Donovan coos, glancing at Sawyer, and I giggle.

Sighing in defeat, Sawyer reluctantly complies, "Fine. We'll get ice

cream. As long as you don't say a word about it and say nothing about cussing, got it?"

"My lips are sealed." She grins, scrunching her nose at him. Turning to face me, she grabs my hands, "Hey!! You guys should come too; it'll be way more fun!!"

"I'm sure they want to go home..." Sawyer rolls his eyes, "They've been out all night..."

"It doesn't hurt to ask!!" Peanut retorts, "What do you guys say?"

We all exchange looks. "Ice cream doesn't sound bad." Daisy says truthfully. Skipper nods, "I'm down."

"Then it's settled!! We'll get ice cream!!" I grip Peanut's hands in mine and her eyes light up. "Yay!" She chirps, wrapping her arms around me, "This is gonna be fun!!"

"Or a headache." Sawyer frowns, and I giggle as she buries her head into my stomach.

Chp. 15: Pinky Swear?

[image] [image] [image] [image]

SAWYER

"**Fucking Penny-Poachers**, I hate 'em."

"That's not a thing."

"Huh?"

"What's a Penny-Poacher, Don?"

Sighing, Donovan looks up at from his phone, "Gosh, do I have to explain everything to you guys?"

"Please." Elias gestures to him, "None of us know what you're talking about."

"At all." Zachary leans back in his chair as various people walk past our table. "Ugh, fine." Donovan groans, setting his phone down, "A Penny-Poacher, by dictionary definition—"

"Not in the dictionary." I cut in, scrolling through my phone, "But please, humor me."

"**Hush**." Donovan whines, "By my dictionary definition, a Penny-Poacher is someone who tracks down and finds everything that's a penny in the store. In other words, these people are 'poachin' on my 'pennies'. Well, on Ritchie's."

"Who's Ritchie?"

"Co-worker."

"Everything that's a penny?" Elias raises a brow.

"Yes!! Penny-Poachers are people who make it their mission to hunt and find these penny items. It's common in dollar stores, and lucky

me," Donovan mutters sarcastically, "I work in a dollar store."

"I see." Zachary replies thoughtfully, "I feel so informed."

"Penny-Poachers. Right." I drone sarcastically.

I'm getting a migraine...

"Speaking of which, I ran into a Penny-Poacher the other day." Donovan says enthusiastically, "Before we closed, this old lady came to my register with five things in her basket and said, '***tHeSE aLl sHOuld bE a pENnY***'. And I was like, *'yeah right, lemme see'.* And lo and be-fucking-hold, she was right. It pissed me off. So bad, I said, *'No. Fuck outta my store, you penny-poachin' bitch'."*

"You didnot say that to her." Zachary laughs.

However, Donovan doesn't say a word to confirm or deny anything. He remains completely silent, leaving us all in suspense.

"My god..." Elias gasps, "You said that to her."

Guess he's jobless now...

"No, but I wanted to." Donovan replies honestly. My interest disintegrates as he explains, "I thought about it, but alas...I didn't."

We're meeting Skipper, Daisy, and Marianne at this diner. Donovan made a groupchat with everyone in it, and Marianne suggested the idea. I originally wasn't going to come, but I found myself getting in the car anyway.

Figured it's something to do and not because Marianne will be here.

Over this past week of my suspension, the guys stuck by my side. They ran errands with me, visited me at work, babysat Peanut with me, and even convinced me to go to the mall to hangout at "The Arcade".

Surprisingly, their parents didn't seem to care that they decided to skip out on school. Elias's parents are strict, Zachary's parents don't like him missing school, and Donovan's Mom also doesn't like him

missing school. But the guys convinced them somehow.

After discovering I was suspended, Dad and Evan weren't upset. They were happy I was okay.

Hell, Evan and Dad seemed proud of my decision.

They were also glad that the repercussions weren't worse. So, I could do anything I wanted to during my suspension, even when I insisted otherwise.

I changed Skipper's tire a few days ago, and Peanut couldn't stop talking about how much she liked meeting Marianne, Skipper, and Daisy.

She really likes Marianne, especially since I talk about her so much. I admit it; I do. Not too much, but enough, I guess. She even told Dad and Evan about it and left out the ice cream part, just as promised.

"She sounds like an angel." Evan smirked as Peanut plopped down beside him on the couch. "Sawyer was right!! She's nice!!" Peanut nodded, swinging her legs side to side, "And very pretty!!"

"I never said that." I muttered, doing my crossword in the chair across from them.

"Lies." Evan scoffed as he grabbed Peanut and gently ruffled her hair, "I can't think of one time you talked about her without mentioning it."

Peanut laughed as Evan continued messing up her hair, "Just the other day, you said she was an idiotic, pretty mess. Or wait, did I make that up?"

"I see where Peanut learned to be a compulsive liar..."

"It's true!!" Peanut laughed once she escaped Evan.

"No, I didn't."

"She does sound very polite, Sawyer." Dad smiled, as he sat beside Peanut, "I think this is the most I've heard you talk about someone. Or in

general. It's interesting."

I closed my crossword book, "So what I talk about her?"

Dad didn't say a word, but his face did. That same smug look he and Donovan make whenever they're telling me, 'I'm full of shit' without telling me, 'I'm full of shit'.

"Don't look at me like that." My face flushed.

"Hey!! You should invite her over!!" Evan grinned, now putting Peanut in a headlock.

*" **YEAH** !!" Peanut giggled as she grabbed Evan's arm, " **YOU TOTALLY SHOULD!!** "*

Naturally, it was a resounding **hell no**.

It's Monday, meaning I go back to school tomorrow. Not looking forward to that.

"I almost believed you." Elias chuckles.

"Yeah, no, I didn't. Oh, hey!! I just remembered!!" Donovan sits up in his seat excitedly, "This is the perfect time to talk before they get here!! Sawyer, remember when we changed Skipper's tire."

I type on my crossword app, "What about it?"

"So, we were getting ice cream, you took Peanut to the bathroom, and I was getting napkins to clean up the ice cream I spilled on the counter. I went back to sit with the girls, but I overheard them talking about their boyfriends."

"Their boyfriends?" Elias snorts, "Isn't Daisy the only one with a boyfriend?"

"That's what I thought 'til Skipper said something about Marianne's boyfriend."

"Her what?" I look up from my phone.

"Wait, huh?" Zachary asks, "Mari's got a boyfriend?"

"No she doesn't." I retort, setting my phone down.

"Easy there, Sawyer." Zachary snorts, leaning on the table, "We don't know that; who's to say she doesn't?"

"She doesn't."

She's never mentioned one...

Elias raises a brow, "She told you this?"

No...

"I know she doesn't." I grit.

"I'm being serious." Donovan insists when a waitress approaches our table and sets drinks down for us.

Elias wastes no time flirting with her as she does while Donovan continues, "When I went over there, Skipper said, 'Well, Mari's boyfriend sure isn't going to like that' or some shit. And Daisy was like, 'We all know how he is. Asshole.' Then Marianne was like, 'Yeah, well, he isn't here, so'. And I was like, 'Oh shit. Gotta tell the boys'. Then I forgot because Skipper elbowed me."

"Why?" Zachary raises a brow as he grabs his cup of water.

"Eavesdropping, supposedly."

"Justified." I cross my arms, "You misheard them."

"Swear to God, that's what I heard!!" Donovan raises his hands innocently, "I'm an excellent eavesdropper, Sawyer. You know I'm always in 'The Know'."

"You're so adamant about this being untrue." Elias flings straw paper at Zachary, "It's almost as if you're...jealous."

Jealous?

I scoff, "**Please**."

I just don't like the thought of some guy being all over her-

"Oooo!! Jealous!!" Zachary teases, balling the straw paper up and throwing it back. "Extra jelly." Donovan smirks, "You wish that was you, huh?"

"I'm not jealous."

"**Hello, boys**."

We look to our right and find Skipper, Daisy, and Marianne standing there. Skipper looks amongst us, hands on her hips, and Daisy grips her purse strap. Marianne's standing beside her, waving at us.

Daisy raises a brow, adjusting her blouse, "What are we talking about?"

"**Bullshit**." I reply flatly, and Skipper snorts.

"Someone's eager to change the subject..." Elias sips his soda, and I shoot him a glare. Skipper laughs and Daisy smiles, "Right. Bullshit."

They sit in the three empty chairs at our table, Marianne sitting beside me. I try to act indifferent, as everyone begins talking amongst themselves.

Grinning, she nudges me, "Thought you weren't coming."

"I wasn't." I prop my head in my hand.

"What changed?"

You.

My cheeks flush, and I avoid her gaze, "Cause."

"Just cause?"

"Yep."

She giggles, "Okay." Kindly, she says, "I'm glad you came anyway!!"

I am too...

"Mmhm..." Is all I manage, my face hot.

Her smile brightens, and I can't take my eyes off her. I sigh hopelessly and one staggering realization hits me. Hits me hard.

I've missed her.
I've really missed her.

Fuck me-

My thoughts are soon interrupted when I remember what Donovan said.

"Marianne's boyfriend."
"Skipper said, 'Well, Mari's boyfriend sure isn't going to like that'. Daisy was like, 'We all know how he is. Asshole.' Marianne was like, 'Yeah, well, he isn't here, so'."

I glance over at her as she talks to everyone, gushing about a new song she learned on the piano.

There's no way she has a boyfriend...
Right?

"Welcome back, Grumpy! I don't know if you like Reese's, but I figured I'd give you some as a welcome-back gift!! And a Gatorade cause you like drinking those!! From yours truly!! Mari!!

P.S.

What do you call an imaginary color?
*A **PIGMENT** of imagination!! :)"*

I stare at the card decorated with stickers and glitter, finding it hard to look away.

I hold Marianne's Matcha Latte in one hand and the card in the other, lost in thought. She gave it to me this morning when the guys and I first walked in. She gushed about how happy she was to see us again.

Then, out of nowhere, she pulled out welcome-back gifts: snacks and handwritten cards.

And, well-

"Idiot..." I mutter, feeling warm.

I haven't put it down.

It's annoying...and gross...

I told her that I was going to throw it away and she only laughed and said, "Do what you want with it!!"

I lied; I'm not throwing this away.

However, I promise I'm not keeping up with it along with the pin and sticker she gave me.

I'm not planning on setting it on my desk in my room so I can see it. Nor am I planning to put it in my bag so I can look at it when I'm at school. And I'm sure as hell, not planning on putting it in my car so I can have it anywhere I go.

I'm not doing that, why would I?

"**Sawyer**."

I slip the card back into my hoodie pocket and look up to find Marianne exiting the restroom.

She skips toward me, "Thanks for waiting!!"

I nod, holding my arm out to her, and she wraps her dainty fingers around my bicep. Those stupid fluttery feelings consume my chest.

"Okay!!" She chirps as I give her back her drink, "Shall we?"

Side by side, she and I walk down the hall. She talks and smiles like she always does first thing in the morning, telling me about the latest drama spreading around school. The boyfriend thing is still on my mind.

However, I'm slightly less worried because I'm assuming Donovan misheard them. He had to.

I continue listening to Marianne, nodding along. She gazes up at me with a warm expression, that big, dimply grin on her face.

My eyes meet hers, and fuck, I really can get lost in them.

Brown.

Like honey or caramel. Yet around her pupils are golden flecks and they mix with the darker shades to create this pretty color.

They're warmer and brighter than how summer feels-

"But yeah!! That's all the drama swarming this place!! Very strange!!" She explains, tugging me from thought, "You should've seen it!! There was one girl, her name's Ember, she's really sweet, but like she was telling me all about some of the rumors and stuff, and I-Oh!!"

She cuts herself off, sounding sympathetic, "Oh my gosh!! I've been talking this whole time; I am so sorry. I'm just blabbing on and on. If I'm talking too much, like, flick my forehead or something."

"It's fine." I shake my head, "You're not talking too much."

I like listening to you...

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. Was there anything else?"

"Hmm...oh!! Yeah!! Aren't you excited about the events coming up? Senior Tailgate!! Homecoming!! The game!! Then fall-break!!"

"Looking forward to fall-break; can't say much about the others." I explain, "I don't care for Homecoming."

"I was looking forward to it."

"Was?"

"Daisy and Skipper said they couldn't go because of work and stuff. So..." She shrugs disappointedly, "No. Not going. I'm sure it would've been fun, but oh well..."

My brows furrow at her somber tone.

"No big deal! There are other things we can go to!" She sips her latte. Suddenly, her phone vibrates.

"Whoop!! I wonder who that could be!!" She sings, letting go of my arm and digging into her pocket. She pulls out her phone, seeing the screen momentarily.

Her face drops, "Oh..."

There's a change in her demeanor, her eyes on the screen. She clears her throat, an uncomfortable feeling filling the air between us, "That's weird...why is he texting me..."

'He'? Who is 'He'?

I turn to her, concerned, "Who texted you?"

My jaw tightens at the thought of her talking to some guy. Some flirty asshole-

I swear if Donovan was right-

"He...He is no one." She quickly puts her phone away, "I just got a text from a person...and it was about some...stuff..."

"Stuff?" I echo.

She plasters on a smile. The kind that doesn't reach her eyes.

"Yeah!! Y'know? Stuff!! People are weird!!" She laughs dryly. Waving it off, she says, sounding more chipper than usual, "Anyway!! Come on!! Let's get to class!! Mrs. Hawkins said we'd be in the library today!!"

She walks ahead of me, and I follow, noticing her off behavior. There's no bounce in her step, and her arms are stiff. Her whole

vibe feels off.

The hell just happened?

She was happy one minute, and now this.

Thoughts of what she said only minutes ago replay in my head, and I'm trying to figure out what any of this might mean. And who the fuck is 'He'?

I stare at my computer, trying to focus but can't. I glance at Marianne again as she gathers some notebooks and papers and stacks them beside her laptop. She sighs, then glances at her phone.

Has been since we got here. I shift my attention back to my computer, trying to fight the urge to be a nosy fucker and remain silent.

Not to my surprise, I spare her another look, dreading this quiet.

No humming. No tapping feet. No Dad Jokes or random facts. Nothing. Just weird silence. And as much as I don't want to admit it...

I hate it.

She sits quietly, her expression tense. I look from her to the phone, which she grabs and taps vigorously on the screen. I gnaw on my bottom lip.

She said 'He'. I haven't stopped thinking about that.

Maybe I should-

I try to shake the thought out of my head, realizing how absurd that is.

Don't do it.
Don't fucking do it-

"So..." I say, hating myself for what I'm about to do. I submit my assignment in Google Classroom and clear my throat, "Was

that..,your boyfriend who texted you?"

"Huh?" Marianne blurts, caught off guard, "Boyfriend?"

"Yeah." I become annoyed that I'm eager to know, "Earlier...in the hallway, you said something about 'He'...so did your...boyfriend text you?"

'Cause if she is with some guy, he seems like a dick.

And no, I'm not saying that because I'm "jealous" if that's what you think. I'm saying that because if he made her that uncomfortable from a single text, he's an asshole.

"Oh..." Marianne replies, a slight smile playing on her lips, "You think I have a boyfriend?"

"Um—" I hum, realizing I've dug myself into a hole.

Shit, retreat-

"Well...I assumed you might." I scratch my head, "Doesn't sound farfetched...y'know?"

God-stop talking-

"Oh..." She laughs. Probably out of awkwardness, she adjusts her shirt sheepishly, "Well, I'm flattered, but...I don't have a boyfriend."

My shoulders deflate.

I'm going to punch Donovan so hard when I see him-

"I was just wondering...whoever you were talking to...sounded like they made you upset earlier, so..."

"Yeah. Technically, they did. The 'He' I'm referring to is, um..." An awkward expression slips onto her face as she sets her phone aside, "Not my boyfriend...but my ex."

*Her **ex** ?*

Well, to be fair, that's not necessarily an outlandish idea, but it's

still surprising to hear her say it.

I'd be more shocked if she said she's never had a boyfriend.

"An ex?" I echo.

"Yeah. He...somehow got my new number."

"Is he bothering you?"

She falls eerily silent, avoiding my gaze, "Um..." She doesn't say anything for a long moment, and my jaw tightens.

Oh...

I gently scoot my seat closer to hers; we're sitting knee against knee, "Marianne, if he's bothering you—"

"No." She looks to me, serious, "He's not. Thank you, but I assure you, he isn't...at least not anymore. I blocked him...again."

Sighing, she explains, "His name is Zeke and we were together for five months. He...wasn't the best of guys. I found out he cheated on me several times."

My eyes widen as she continues, "And let's just say...he hasn't quit trying to contact me since. I came here. We broke up, four months ago by the way, and I have no idea how he got my number. I have a few guesses as to who could've given it to him. Just my luck, I suppose. I just...nevermind."

She shakes her head, "Forget about it!! None of that was important!! What I meant to say was how can a guy who doesn't live here get under my skin? Answer: He can't!! Not if he's blocked!!"

Hating that answer, I reluctantly accept it, "Right."

She's rambling.

And it's obvious the ex in question sucks ass and is harassing her. It bothers me, but it's clear that she doesn't want to talk about it anymore than we have.

"Easy-Fix!!" She closes her computer, "So, you finished your assignment, too, right?" I nod and she blurts, "Wanna know a fun-fact?"

I narrow my eyes, and she laughs, "Of course you do—"

"I never said—"

"Did you know that starfish technically don't have bodies? Their "body" is actually just a head."

I pause, "Uh...What?"

"Yeah!! Starfish lack a torso and a tail, so, technically, Starfish are just heads with arms."

What the fuck-

"That's..." I drawl, "random."

"I know!! It's crazy!!" She chirps, "Just goes to show how strange the ocean is."

Searching her expression, I dryly state, "You're weird."

"In a cool way, right?"

"No."

"Rude." She shakes her head while glancing at her phone. Slowly, I notice an uncomfortable expression on her face. I bite my lip, wishing to make it go away.

It's not like her...

"You know..." I say, choosing my words carefully, "If this ex isn't bothering you, then I won't pry..." Her brows soften as I continue, "And if you don't want to talk about it, that's okay too. But...for the record, you can tell me anything you want...or need to. That includes your facts...jokes...your ex...anything. And...I'll listen. No matter what."

She stares, surprised, and her eyes searching mine. Slowly, a smile comes to her lips, and a part of me becomes stupidly warm at the sight.

"Really?" She whispers.

I nod, "Really." After gazing at one another in silence, my cheeks flush and I look away, "Just...so you know."

Quiet, she murmurs, "Thank you."

"Yep...and...you sure he isn't bothering you?"

"I promise!!" She nods, and holding her pinky out, "I'll even pinky-swear!!"

I look at her hand.

Pinky-Swear?
Pfft! As if I'd ever-

I link my pinky around hers, "Pinky-Swear?"

"Pinky-Swear."

"And you'd tell me if he were, right?" I tug her closer, and she nods. "Of course!!" She says lightly, "I'd even let you beat him up!!"

"Actually?"

She laughs, unlinking our pinkies, and patting my shoulder, "Oh no, don't tell me that's what you'd do."

She continues laughing, covering her mouth, and I raise a brow, "What? I don't get it, what's funny?"

In a heartbeat, I would...
For you and only you...

Chp. 16: Mother Knows Best

[image] [image] [image] [image]

⚠***TW: Emotional***⚠

SAWYER

Senior tailgate is tonight. I wasn't planning to go, but-

"**C'mon, Sawyer!**"

Marianne grabs my arm, urging me to follow, and without question, I do. I trail behind her, chaos and people staring at us as we pass. And while I hate the attention, I'll admit, I can't take my eyes off her.

My ears sting.

How embarrassing...

Once we find Daisy, Marianne asks, raising a brow, "I hear there are brownies?" Daisy grins, sipping lemonade, "Yep!! Mr. Malcom has 'em!! I'm getting one, wanna come?"

"Dude, yeah!!"

Looking up at me, Marianne tilts her head, star-stickers on her cheeks, "You like brownies? I can get you one!!"

I shake my head, "You don't—"

"Nonsense!! I'll be back!!"

Her hand slides away, and the loss is instant. I squeeze my lips together. She and Daisy link arms and skip towards Coach Malcolm's table of food and drinks. I watch as she joins the crowd, talking amongst people and grabbing two brownies.

I really wasn't going to come. Especially after that mess with

Jamison. But as it turns out, "no" doesn't exist in my vocabulary anymore. "No" is my favorite word.

I silently scold myself.

What's wrong with me?

Suddenly, someone slaps my chest, and I stiffen. Bringing a hand to my chest, I look over to find Elias. I frown as he smirks, shaking his wet hair while a towel lying over his shoulders and tank-top.

He grins, "You're not getting in the pool at least?" I scoff, "No. I don't swim."

Oh, so now I can say 'no'-

"You don't, or you can't?" He chuckles, and I roll my eyes.

"I swim better than you."

"**DONOVAN HARRIS**!!"

We turn to the pool and find Donovan wrapping his arms around Skipper's torso from behind. He drags her to the pool backwards, an evil grin on his face.

Pushing his arms, she shouts, "**GET OFF—**"

"Brace yourself!!" He chortles, dragging them both in.

They splash, many of our peers and teachers laughing at the scene. I shake my head, and Elias chuckles. I shift my attention over to Zachary across the field and see him flirting with a group of girls.

"Poor Zach." Elias sucks his teeth, "The art of flirting is lost on him."

I hum and my eyes, seemingly on their own, flit back in Marianne's direction. As soon as I do, I'm doing a double take. Marianne smiles, talking to some guy as he runs a hand through his dreads, and I grimace.

Giovanni.

She said that was his name. He's in our literature class, as well as Marianne's theatre class. He asked if Marianne, Skipper, and Daisy were going to the tailgate.

They've been talking off and on the entire time, and I didn't comment on it at first.

But now-

Looking around at all the activities, Elias suddenly asks, sounding curious, "Where are Daisy and Mari, you know?"

I don't answer, nor spare him a look. That prompts him to follow my gaze, curious. "Hm? Oh!! It's Giovanni!!" He says delightedly.

"You know him?" I ask, failing to hide my irritation.

"Yeah!! From beta-club!!"

"Mm."

I continue glaring, and notice Elias looking between me, Giovanni, and Marianne from my peripheral. After a moment of silence, he gasps, "Oh, I see why we're staring so hard—"

"Shut up."

"Ah, so you don't know."

I whip around to face him, "Know what?"

He smiles all smug and shit. The classic, "I know something you don't" grin.

Impatient, I snap, "Spit it out, Elias." His eyes flit to Marianne's direction again, "Look."

I reluctantly do and find Marianne, Giovanni, and another guy standing with them. However, Giovanni's got his arm wrapped around this guy's waist, kissing his cheek as the guy smiles and talks with Marianne.

Surprise and relief flood me, and I deflate.

Oh...

Elias pats my shoulder, "You see?"

I glance over at him, swallowing from either embarrassment or annoyance (not sure) at the fact that he called me out.

He chuckles when I shrug his hand off, *"I knew that..."*

Marianne and Daisy finally escape the crowds and make it to where we are. Marianne holds up three brownies, "I have returned!! Sorry it took me so long!! I was talking to Giovanni and Morgan!!"

I shake my head, "It's fine."

She hands me my brownie, "Here ya go!!" I take it and she hands one to Elias, saying, "I saw you over here, Elias!! I got you one too!!"

Elias smiles, taking it, "Aw, Mari, you're too kind!!"

"She is." Daisy agrees warmly.

Suddenly, Marianne's phone rings, and she jumps, tugging it from her pocket. She checks it, looks at us, and says, "Ooo, I better take this!!" She waves, "I'll be back!!"

"You want me to go with?" Daisy eats her brownie, and Marianne shakes her head.

"No, I'll go to Skipper's car!!" Marianne pulls Skipper's keys from her pocket, "I'll be back!!"

She then skips through the crowds in the direction of the cars.

Turning back to the brownie, I examine it, and Elias nudges my shoulder. I look at him when he asks, "She got you one?" I nod, unwrapping it and he says, surprised, "But you—"

"I know."

I don't like brownies.

I take a bite.

But I couldn't tell her 'no'. She was getting it for me.

MARIANNE

Crap, what's today?

I try to remember.

It's Wednesday...meaning-

"She always calls on Wednesdays." I sigh.

I sit in Skipper's car, staring at my phone and watching it ring. Contemplating if I should answer. Unfortunately, it's not anyone I particularly want to talk to. I could always say I missed it.

She's done that to me plenty of times.

My throat goes dry, and a dreadful feeling settles in the pit of my stomach. Anxiety. Suddenly, my mind wanders back to when Sawyer had asked me about my "boyfriend."

Zeke.

I shudder at that memory.

Unknown:
I miss you. I'm sorry. Please Mar-Mar can we talk?
Answer me. I deserve that much at least don't I?

I know exactly who might've given him my number.

Either my **Mother-**

AKA, the person calling me. AKA-AKA, someone I don't want to talk to.

Or my stepsister, **Alexis**.

Sighing, I weigh my options.

Just answer it, it won't be bad...
So why do I feel like this?
Maybe because I know how it's going to go...
It's the same every time...

I take a deep breath and finally find the nerve to answer.

Bringing my phone to my ear, I reply, "Mother!! Hi!!" Crossing my arm under the other, I state, "I almost forgot you were going to call today!!"

"Hello, darling." She replies, sounding everything but enthusiastic, "And yes!! I was going to call you today, good on you for remembering."

"Yeah. Good on me." I laugh bitterly, "So what's up?"

"Nothing much, just work, and dealing with your stepfather and stepsister, you know how that goes."

"Totally."

"Yes."

She pauses for a moment, and I can practically see her making her infamous, judgmental face.

Clearing her throat, she adds in a more serious tone, "Oh, and sweetie." I cringe as Mother goes on to say matter-of-fact, "Please use proper etiquette when speaking. "Totally" and "what's up," are not proper terms. You know this already."

Annoyed by the comment, I hold back from saying anything. Like I always do.

I take a silent deep breath, "Right. Sorry, Mother."

Sighing, she says offhandedly, "No need to apologize. Just be aware. I know your friends speak that way, but you know better. You are better. Don't let those speech classes you took for four years go to

waste. I don't want them influencing you to use lazy words such as that, understand?"

"Understood."

"Good. Now that that's out of the way," She says, "How's practice and school??"

"It's good."

Smiling, I reminisce on all the memories I've made so far, "Practice is as always. And...I lik-find it enjoyable to be here. I've met so many interesting, delightful people, everyone here is so nice, and it's overall been so much excitement. The opportunities are limitless. I've made some new friends, and they're great!!"

Almost everyone here is nice. I've run into a few not-so-nice people, like Larissa and maybe Dorian?

I'm not sure about him yet.

"I'm glad." Mom replies, "Although I disapprove and think it's a waste of time, I'm happy for you...I guess."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Marianne, I feel that going to this school is simply useless. Your high scoring in so much, you have a 4.0 GPA, you're taking college courses, you're a gold medalist pianist, and you're top of your class!! You had the option to graduate early and instead left private school and chose to go to a low-funded, public one for the sake of friends. It's a waste of time. Especially when you could be doing something more productive like worrying about your studies, piano classes, and applying to schools."

"I just thought—" I bite my thumb, "this is my last year in high school, and I wanted to spend it with them. Plus, it's different than what I usually do. I'm making memories and enjoying the experience like you always tell me to do. Make useful connections."

"Mhm, well, be sure you're utilizing your time wisely. Anyway, I must go. Work is calling. Be sure to study, be mindful of your

speech, and be careful of who you befriend. I hope letting you go to Michigan wasn't a mistake and ruin what we've worked for. I was already skeptical, but I digress. This isn't permanent anyway."

"Well, Mother—"

"Oh!! And I saw in a photo Janine posted that you let your hair curl up instead of straightening it. I recommend that you do something about that. Also, please consider wearing less baggy or street clothes, and something more...presentable. You have a reputation to uphold."

I glance down at my outfit and touch a small strand of my kinky, curls hanging in my face.

"You should be more like your stepsister, Alexis. She's the perfect example of excellence and formality. Use her as your guide instead of your friends. They aren't...the best. But anyway, I really must be going!! Love you."

"Love you too...Mother..."

"So, he's a bit of a fixer-upper!! So, he's got a few flaws like his peculiar brain, dear!! His thing with the reindeer!! That's a little outside of nature's laws!!"

I sit in my room, staring out of my window at the small pond and woods. I lean on my hand as I prop myself up on the windowsill. My TV plays in the background, 'Frozen' singing loudly and filling in the silence.

Reaching into the bowl next to me, I grab a handful of popcorn and bring it to my mouth. Chewing, I mutter, "My life's a bit of a fixer-upper..."

Sighing, I mindlessly lay my head on the windowsill, "If only my problems could be solved by the power of love and friendship. Imagine how much easier things would be..."

Instead, I'm relying on the power of God and Anime...

Not to mention the constant caffeine, Dad Jokes, stickers, and

random facts.

If I were a coffee right now, I'd be a Depresso Espresso.

DOUBLE-SHOT. WHAM, IN YO FACE-

I should be more positive...

After the conversation I had with Mom, it wasn't too long before we all left the tailgate and went home. Everyone seemed to have noticed my attitude change, but I assured them I was just tired.

Sawyer, Daisy, and Skipper didn't seem too convinced though. Once I came home, my anxiety came down, and I was extra sad.

Mother and I's conversations were never good. She's always telling me what I should and shouldn't be doing. Reminding me that I'm representing our family, so I have to be the best. Pressuring me to succeed in everything. Whether I want to or not.

Not once in my life has she said she was proud or allowed me to do the things I wanted. She doesn't even know I got my belly button pierced as soon as I got here.

If I did, she'd have a fit.

She never likes what I'm wearing, my hobbies, my interests, my talents (excluding the piano), or anything. She always found/finds a reason not to like it. Whenever I suggest something I like or want, it wouldn't matter. It's either I do what she likes, or I do what she likes.

She and Dad were different in that way.

At least before he left us.

*" **Marianne** ?"*

I look over my shoulder and find Aunt Cass standing in the doorway. She leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, "You okay? You're in here babbling to yourself again." Softly, she smiles, "Let me guess, you lost your phone again?"

"Uh, no." I retort narrowing my eyes. She raises a brow as I continue, "It's right here—"

I look to my left at my bed, and find it isn't there. I pause, panic setting in as I try to remember what I did with it.

Damnit.

"I'll find it later..." I sigh, grabbing another handful of popcorn and shoving it into my mouth, "And as for whether I'm okay or not...I'll to get back to you on that..."

"Get back to me?" Aunt Cassie echoes.

"Yeah. I'll have an answer tomorrow."

"Mhm."

Walking into the room, she sits on my bed with a grunt. I look over at her as she gestures to me, "Come sit."

I narrow my eyes, wiping popcorn off my face and swallowing, "This is a trap."

She snorts as she tosses her long, dark, kinky curls over her shoulder, "Why would this be a trap, Mari?"

"You're gonna make me confess something..."

"I'm not!! I just want to spend time with my niece!! What's the harm in that?"

"Ehh..."

"C'mon!! I know you wanna!!"

I stare at her, and she only grins innocently. Before I can help it, I laugh a little, "Okay, fine."

Slowly, I get up and drag myself to sit next to her. As soon as I do, she wraps her arms around me and plants a kiss on my head, "There we go!! Some sweet Aunt and niece bonding time!!"

"Sweet..." I mutter, as she hugs and gives me a gentle squeeze. I lay my head on her shoulder, as she rubs my arm.

We stay like this for a little while longer before she murmurs, "What's wrong, Mari? You've been quiet since I got home. Usually, you'd be telling me about school, your friends, stickers, a random fact, or joke...and you haven't..."

I bite my lip as she continues, "You barely touched your cheeseburger from your favorite restaurant."

I glance up at her, pursing my lips, "I knew you were going to try and make me confess something..."

"You caught me."

We stay quiet for a long moment again, and I sigh, "It's...about Mom." Aunt Cassie pauses, "Oh. I see."

I look down at my hands, "She called...like usual. And before you ask, I didn't tell her what I wanted to do after high school. She wouldn't listen anyway. The conversation was the same. My hair's a mess, she doesn't approve of my friends, she doesn't like the way I dress, and she wishes I hadn't come here. I don't know why I was hopeful for a different outcome once I left."

Swallowing, I continue, "I just thought...I could prove to her how happy and successful I am not doing things her way...that for once she'd be happy for me instead of saying I'm wrong. I thought I could change her mind."

Ugh-what was I thinking?
She'll never change...
She's never taken my side for anything...

Tears come to my eyes, and my lips quiver, "You know...Mom's never seemed to like me very much. Nothing I did she approved of. And after Dad left us for Sandra...it felt like it only got worse. It feels like she hates me sometimes. Like, I'm not allowed to be myself. She never considers my feelings, all that matters is I do things her way. Make "us" look good. And if I don't...she'll be

disappointed...over and over again." I sniffle, closing my eyes, "She probably does hate me..."

"She doesn't hate you, Marianne." Aunt Cassie slicks a strand of my hair behind my ear, "Don't say that. She doesn't hate you. It's just...your mom...my sister...she's...a lot like our mother. Stubborn and stuck in her ways."

"Yeah...but..."

I fall silent, a small tear trailing down my cheek. My vision blurs, my anxiety worsening, "Even still...it hurts. Just because that's how she is, doesn't change how it makes me feel. How many times I've cried but never told her cause I was afraid. I do it her way, it's not enough; I'm doing it wrong, she's disappointed; I don't do anything, it's all ruined, and I need to be better. I'm at my wits-end. I try my best to meet her and do things "right," but how long can I do that before I-Gosh, I'm rambling..."

Bringing my hands to my face, I whimper, "I've told you this before...I'm sorry...for dragging you into this mess. I'm sure you were happier before you found out about all the drama between Mom and me and the whole situation with Dad. I feel horrible. There's a reason you distance yourself from us and yet I...I'm so sorry—"

"You didn't drag me into this."

Forcing me to meet her gaze, she says, hurt expression written on her face, "You can tell me as many times as you need about your mother, your father, and everything you've got going on. No matter what. And you know how long it's been since I've seen you in person and not through a phone screen? Years. You were only six the last time I saw you."

Wiping away a tear, she whispers, "And though your mother and I don't see eye to eye on everything, I'd do this all over again. When I got that call that you were coming to stay with me, I was ecstatic. I'd finally get to meet you again. After so long. And I'm happier than I've ever been."

Almost immediately, I start sobbing. Ugly-crying. I sniffle, tears and snot rolling down my face. Pulling me into her embrace, she whispers, "Aww, honey..."

"Really? I'm not burdening you??" I cry, sniffling.

"Of course not, Mari. You'd never be a burden." Rubbing my back, she runs a hand through my curls, "Never."

I cry for a while, Aunt Cassie holding me close and comforting me. After what feels like forever, we part, and I huff.

Wiping my face with the back of my sweater sleeve, I murmur, "Um...I may or may not...have put snot on your shirt..."